HUNTER TRAVEL

travel adventures

# YUCATÁN

## CANCÚN, COZUMEL, RIVIERA MAYA

Vivien Lougheed

4th Edition

VISIT…

*Travel Adventures*

# Yucatán

## Cancún, Cozumel

**4th Edition**

**Vivien Lougheed**

HUNTER

*Hunter Publishing, Inc.*
*30 Mayfield Avenue*
*Edison, NJ 08817*
*☎ 800-255-0343 / Fax 732-417-1744*
*Web site: www.hunterpublishing.com*
*E-mail: comments@hunterpublishing.com*

*IN CANADA*
*Ulysses Travel Publications*
*4176 Saint-Denis*
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*Front cover:*

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Caribbean Sea
Rio Lagartos
Dzilám de Bravo
Chiquila
Progreso
Sisal
Tizimín
Isla Mujeres
Mérida
Cancún
Izamal
Celestún
Pisté
Playa del Carmen
Valladolid
Muna
YUCATAN
Isla Cozumel
Cobá
Ticul
Oxkutzcab
Tulum
Tepich
Campeche
Hopelchén
Felipe Carillo Puerto
Champotón
CAMPECHE
QUINTANA ROO
N
Bacalar
Escárcega
Chetumal
Xpuhil
Corozal Town
GUATEMALA
BELIZE
NOT TO SCALE
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# Introduction

Northerners like to leave icy climates for sun, sand and warm water. The Yucatán has these. But some travelers are looking for more than this so they move inland across the jungles that hide Mayan ceremonial caves and ruins and exotic plants and animals. Mexicans are good at helping travelers forget the ice and snow by building luxury spas and resorts that include romantic restaurants with just enough Mexican flavor to make them exciting but not so much as to make them strange.

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Mexico has also improved access to the jungle, the ruins and to colonial cities where dancers and musicians in traditional clothes perform in the plazas and restaurants. Air-conditioned tour buses with English speaking guides take us to the caves at Loltun or the World Heritage Site of Chichén Itzá and we swim like Maya virgins in the green waters of the cenotes. We visit wildlife reserves and internationally recognized wetlands that seethe with 10,000 pink flamingos and we take photos. The Mexicans return us to our hotels in time to sip colored fruit drinks decorated with hibiscus flowers and spiked with Mexican tequila. We then watch the red fire of the sun sink into the ocean.

*The Yucatán Peninsula from space*

Some of us go on our own and stay in quaint local hotels, eat foods sold by vendors on the streets and ride third-class buses. We try speaking Spanish and we laugh at ourselves when hopelessly lost because we didn't understand what was said to us. For many, the Yucatán becomes a favorite destination. Travelers return again and again and the welcoming Mexicans care for us like royalty.

**THINGS YOU MUST SEE & DO**

- Chichén Itzá – World Heritage Site.
- Laltun Cave
- Colonial City of Campeche
- Flamingos at Celestun
- Sleep in a grass and reed hut on the beach at Tulum
- Watch traditional dancing at the Plaza in Mérida

# History

History gives us the stories that compel our imaginations to appreciate what we have come to see. It gives us reasonable explanations for the question "why?".

The Yucatán was home to one of the greatest pre-Columbian civilizations in America, that of the Maya. At its height, the Maya civilization had an estimated population of over a million people. They left magnificent temples and a rich culture still practiced today.

But even before the Maya, who?

## Paleo-Indians

*Paleo-Indian Olmec sculpture at Monte Verde*

The main pattern of Paleo-Indian settlement in the Americas (about 20,000-7,000 BC) is generally agreed upon, though dates and details keep changing and infighting among anthropologists and archaeologists is intense. By about 20,000 BC, the last ice age was into a long decline. Beringia, the low-lying area connecting Asia and North America, provided a route for migrating humans down into ice-free southern Alberta. The rest of the

Americas was wide open, but the migrants moved south along the mountain chains. They stuck to the highlands because these areas supported the large herbivores that they ate: mammoth, mastodon, caribou, bison, horse, giant armadillo, giant sloth, guanaco, llama, and vicuña.

The dating of sites shows the progression, first north to south, then east to west. These dates also show how long the process took. Sites like Monte Verde in southern Chile have been reliably dated to about 12,000-10,000 BC. Estimates are that in Mesoamerica (Mexico and Central America) the highlands may have been populated as early as 18,000 BC.

Archaeologists also learned from the sites how the Paleo-Indians lived. In Monte Verde there were wood and skin huts containing brazier pits. Mastodon and other large herbivore bones were found, along with the remains of seeds, nuts, berries, and roots. Tools included stone hand axes, choppers, and scrapers; some of these tools may have had wooden handles. The weapons were wooden lances and stones chosen or shaped so they could be hurled by slings.

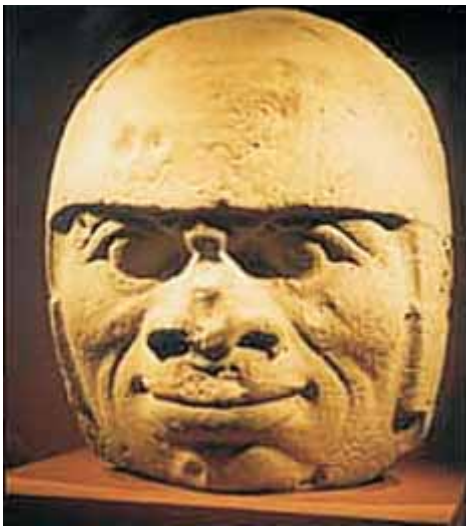
Once the Americas were occupied from top to bottom, population pressure and global warming resulted in movement into the lowlands, along the coastlines (which were farther out to sea then), and onto the Caribbean islands. Increasing temperatures changed the highlands in particular, leaving them less habitable. In Mesoamerica the grasslands turned to deserts, and the large herbivores disappeared, leaving smaller game like rabbits and deer.

Along the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean, the grasslands turned into forests. Since Mesoamerica was and still is rich in edible plants, such as mesquite, cactus, and agave, people ate more grains, fruits, and vegetables and less meat, though domesticated ducks and dogs were used as a meat supply. By 11,000 BC, wild corn, onions, amaranth, avocado, acorns, piñon nuts, chili peppers, maguey, and prickly pear were added to the human diet. By 8000 BC, the Paleo-Indian period of Mesoamerica was coming to an end. Chasing game was giving way to clearing land, cultivating domestic plants, and raising domestic animals.

By 7,000 BC, the nomadic hunters were growing crops, especially squash, avocados, and chili peppers. By 5000 BC, maize – a small, wheat-like ancestor of corn – was being grown in the Tehuacan Valley of Southern Mexico. By 3000 BC, pit house settlements were popular. A pit house is a tent-like wood, wattle, and daubed-mud structure erected over a hole dug into the ground. By 2300 BC, pottery replaced stone jars and bowls, village life was the norm, and population growth was exploding.

## Olmec Culture

Although no burial sites have ever been found, it is believed the Olmecs were a highly sophisticated group that lived in south and central Mexico



*Olmec head*

from about 1000-300 BC. They are credited with developing the first large religious ceremonial centers and temples in the Yucatán and the first signs of jaguar worship appeared in their temples. During the height of their civilization, they carved massive 10-foot-high basalt-stone heads that adorned their plazas. The Olmecs also had advanced stone sewer systems in their cities. They devised some of the first writing and the 260-day calendar. They were an agrarian society but, since they were close to the ocean, supplemented their diets with fish.

By 300 BC other tribes such as the Toltecs and eventually the Aztecs arrived and assimilated. Because of their advanced civilization the Olmecs are considered by some anthropologists to be the mother culture of Mesoamerica.

The Olmecs have two face styles in their artwork; one similar to the Semitic tribes of the bible and the other of African or Polynesian style.

## Maya Culture

The origins of the Maya in Paleo-Indian America have not yet been traced. Their language, it has recently been discovered, is similar to Uru, the working class tribe of the Andes (the Aymara and Quechua were the warriors and aristocrats)) and Chipaya in the highlands of the Andes, so their migration pattern could be as complex as that of the Arawaks and Caribs, who came north from Venezuela.

The archaeological record dates Mayan sites in Southern Mexico, Guatemala, N. Honduras, El Salvador, and Belize back to 2000 BC at least. The earliest known Maya settlement in the Yucatán was at Dzibilchaltun, occupied from around 1500 BC to 1000 BC. But the Yucatán wasn't heavily populated until after the collapse of Tikal in Guatemala. The Maya seem to have then migrated from the highlands to the ocean.

During the Classic Period of the Maya civilization (250-1000 AD), the biggest centers were in Guatemala, and the Mexican states of Chiapas, Campeche, Yucatán and Tabasco, and as far south as Honduras and El

*Templo de las Siete Muñecas, Dzibilchaltun (Luyten)*

Salvador. After the fall of Tikal, the last centers to exist in the Yucatán were Tulum and Mayapan. The Post Classic Period lasted at least 600 years, until the Europeans arrived.

The details of Maya civilization are gradually falling into place, though big pieces of the story are missing, like why the civilization began to decline shortly before the Europeans arrived. By that time, the big cities had been abandoned, and the center of Maya power was shifting north to the Yucatán. Overpopulation and depletion of land is the usual explanation. An overly rigid social structure, that favored inherited rank and knowledge over ability, is another.

Maya civilization, along with the sister Mesoamerican civilizations such as the Zapotec and Mixtec around Oaxaca and the Olmecs on the Gulf of Mexico, started to flourish around 500 BC. This flourishing was a result of **agriculture** and the gradual improvement of technology and techniques that settled agricultural life permits. There was more time for consolidation and improvement. Textiles replaced hides, ceramics replaced worked stone, bricks replaced wattle. More and more plant types were domesticated (seeds selected, sorted, and planted); Mesoamerica, particularly the Guatemalan highlands, was for a time one of the world centers of plant domestication. After harvests, fields were burned, and seeds were planted with a pointed, fire-hardened digging stick – the same slash-and-burn method used today.

K'awil, the god of sustenance who accepts precious items such as blood, semen, maize, rubber and dough, is associated with royal power and is often seen on scepters used by kings during ceremonies.

**Governance** too became more technical. The extended family units of the Paleo-Indians gave way to village clusters, and leadership became more bureaucratic – though the Mayan city-states were never part of a monolithic empire as with the Incas and Aztecs. During the classic period, Maya society was divided into ranks and classes. The supreme rulers inherited their positions, and were both secular and religious leaders, or priest-nobles. Artisans, merchants, and farmers were also separate classes and inherited their specialties.

While Europe seemed to be stagnating during and after the decline of Roman power, Mesoamerican civilizations flourished.

*Maya glyphs, Palenque*

The Maya **language** was written; the Maya seem to have inherited a set of pictorial symbols from the Olmec. The symbols were like Chinese ideograms: a single picture equaled a word, an idea or a number. But some glyphs are phonetic syllables that spell out words. Decoding is still in progress. Unfortunately, Spanish priests destroyed as much of this writing as they could. Almost everything written on parchment and bark was burned. The Catholic Church considered the writing heretical. But giant, carved-stone stellae that record important events and astronomical calculations survived.

The Maya also developed a **numerology** that they used effectively, especially in their calculations of time. Their number system was based on 20, with the numbers 1 to 19 indicated by dots and dashes and the zero by a shell. This was much more efficient than the Roman numeral system being used in Europe. The fact that the Maya had conceived of a zero put them ahead of European mathematicians. Using their number system and astronomical observations, they calculated the year at 365.2425 days, long before Europeans arrived at their estimation of 365.2422 days. The Maya lunar calendar used a system of 18 months each with 20 days to

equal 360 days, with the final five "unlucky" days at the end. They even devised a Venusian calendar, after calculating the orbit of Venus to within a few seconds, a full 1,000 years before Europeans were able to achieve this, and the Maya knew that Venus passed between the earth and the sun every 584 days. Modern calculations put it at 583.92 days.

These calculations, too, were carved on stone stellae. These carvings couldn't have been part of the calculation process! No mathematician has that kind of time. It was probably done to teach the calculations to the public. No one knows why the Maya were so interested in time. Macro-time, that is; they don't seem to have paid much attention to counting hours and minutes.

According to the Maya calendar, the next apocalypse will be on December 23, 2012. The Maya believe that humans, like other animals, have high and low population density periods and that the current cycle of life began August 11, 3114 BC.

In **engineering**, the Maya were like the Egyptians in terms of the size of their projects. They built clay-lined reservoirs in places where water was scarce, and causeways to direct the flow of water or move it from place to place. They terraced hills – necessary when you live in mountains and depend on agriculture. They put swamps into production (mostly growing maize and cacao) with a system of "raised fields," dredging out soil and piling it at set intervals, usually by a method of creating intersecting ridges and expanding the intersections. From the air, these raised fields look like small islands connected by dykes.

*Five-story temple, Edzna (V. Lougheed)*

Finally, the Maya built those incredible ceremonial centers in their cities. They did this without metal tools, without the wheel (though they had toys with wheels) and without the arch. Basically, they backpacked in rubble, dumped it, shaped it level by level (if a pyramid was being constructed), and then faced it with limestone blocks held

together by mortar. Plazas were sloped to let water run off; in dry areas, they sloped into reservoirs or lined trenches that led to reservoirs. Roads connecting the plazas were made of rubble topped with limestone chips and packed with giant stonerollers. Temples were built on the tops of the pyramids, and roof combs topped the temples, making the pyramids quite high.

Heavy stone lintels and the corbel vault were used in adjoining palaces and temples. With the vault, the stones in a wall were inched inward until the two sides met at the top. Vaults are claustrophobic compared to archways if a room was being created, and it made for narrow doors too when it was used instead of a lintel.

**Commerce and trade** flourished among the Maya. Gold came from southern Central America but generally the Maya were not into metals. Salt was harvested along the coasts by 300 BC or earlier. Sea salt was eaten with food and used to preserve meat and fish for storage and transportation. Products from coastal areas – such as salt and shells used in tools and jewelry – were transported far inland and traded for food and jade. This was all done using backpacks, since the Maya did not use pack animals. However, they did build dugout canoes capable of holding up to 50 people as well as some freight. Cacao beans were used as currency. Cacao was the Maya's favorite drink; the beans were roasted, ground, and mixed with maize and water.

The Maya had **drugs** too. Their alcohol was a fermented honey and bark drink called balche. It may have been used only for ceremonial purposes, though it would take a lot of evidence to convince me of that. The Maya were into visions as a part of their religious rituals, hallucinations created mainly by bloodletting but also by the use of balche and wild tobacco, which is much more potent than our tobacco. And for sports there were those ballparks, always in the ceremonial centers of the cities. The game featured a five-pound rubber ball and was a combination of basketball, football, and soccer. Protective clothing was worn, made of wicker or leather.

*Ek Chuah* was the Maya God of war and human sacrifice. The captains of losing ball teams were all sacrificed to this deity. The idea was to extract the victim's heart, while it was still pumping. This was usually done by plunging a dull knife into the chest of the captain. The blood from the heart was smeared on the stone image of Ek Chuah. If the sacrifice took place in a temple on top of a pyramid, the priests tossed the body to the pyramid's base, where it was skinned. The head priest then put on the skin and danced. Players who earned less respect were sometimes shot with bows and arrows rather than cut up with a knife.

# Toltecs

The Toltecs ruled from the 10th to the 12th centuries and were the last dominant group before the Aztecs conquered Mexico. Although the center of their civilization was at Tula just north of Mexico City they had expanded as far east as the Gulf Coast. They were an agricultural society with a religion that required human sacrifice, mostly of enemy prisoners.

*Pyramid at Chichén Itzá*

The most famous center of the Toltecs was at Chichén Itzá, where they had a sophisticated observatory that allowed the scientists to predict accurate celestial movements.

Explaining a solar eclipse, the Maya said that the "sun's face was bitten."

Legends state that in 987 the ruler of the Toltecs, Quetzalcoatle, was defeated and sent onto the Gulf on a raft of snakes. In the same year, Kukulkan, the Serpent God arrived in Chichén Itzá and the city flourished. Other anthropologists claim that Quetzalcoatle was around for centuries before this. Toltec pottery was found as far south as Costa Rica.

However, the Toltec's capital city of Tula was invaded by the Aztecs and the Toltec civilization went into decline.

# The Spanish

## The Valdivia Shipwreck of 1511

Before the Spanish arrived in full force, a small group of shipwrecked Europeans, who were sailing from the Darien in Panama to Santo Domingo, went aground. Eighteen survivors drifted for two weeks before landing near Cancún. The Europeans came ashore only to be fattened up by the Maya so they could be served as gourmet dinners for local chiefs. As the natives licked their fingers and watched Jeronimo de Aguilar and Gonzalo Guerrero grow for the next feast, the two made good use of their time in the cages and befriended some of the locals. They gained respect and, in turn, earned their freedom. They made the village their home.

Guerrero even married the daughter of a chief and raised a family. Once the Spanish arrived, Aguilar begged for his freedom from the tribe and was released but Guerrero stayed with his Maya family. Aguilar worked as a translator for the Spanish. But he too was attracted to the Mexican way of life and after a few years of working with the Spanish returned to marry an Aztec woman.

*Jeronimo de Aguilar and Cortéz*

## Conquistadors

The Spanish had trouble colonizing Mayan territory. Compared to the Maya, the Aztecs were pushovers and even the Incas were fairly easy. After two years in America, Cortéz in 1519 pillaged the Mayan island of Cozumel but he couldn't get a stronghold on the Yucatán mainland. Looking for gold, he sailed south along the Honduran and Belize coastlines, but found the area uninviting – swamp and jungle inhabited by unfriendly Maya.

Cortéz then sailed north to Vera Cruz and by 1521 had marched even farther north, with Aguilar as his scout and interpreter. There were numerous battles, with Guerrero leading the Maya against Cortéz and Aguilar. Guerrero was eventually killed fighting his former friend.

On his quest to conquer Central and South America, Cortéz all but destroyed the Toltecs, Quiche and Cakchiquel in Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Honduras. The Guatemala Maya were gradually driven towards the Yucatán.

## Colonization

Between 1527 and 1547 Francisco de Montego, father and son, carried on a bloody 20-year colonization of the Maya in the Yucatán. These were by far the biggest and bloodiest battles fought by the Spaniards in their New World, and they fought for an area that had no gold or silver. Montejo was subdued and forced to retreat in 1528 but he returned three years later with a huge army and established headquarters at Chichén Itzá. He was again defeated in 1535 so he turned over the power to his son, who established the central ruling city of Mérida. The Maya king of the area converted to Catholicism and became an ally of Montejo's. The rest of the peninsula followed suit and, within 11 years, the conquest of the Yucatán

was complete. The Montejo descendants who resided in Mérida became the richest family in the Yucatán and remain so to this day.

Spanish succeeded in ruling the Yucatán mainly because the Maya were at the same time involved in civil war. Also, ruling classes in Europe were giving more power to the church leaders who ruled more reasonably than the conquistadores. Finally, smallpox spread and killed at an alarming rate, thus weakening the power of the Maya.

The Maya took another hit when Friar Diego de Landa in 1562, under the guise of conversion, destroyed thousands of religious sculptures and numerous hieroglyphic manuscripts supposedly containing "works of the devil." Only four of the original books survived the fires of Landa. Those unwilling to accept the new religion were tortured and murdered.

*Friar Diego de Landa*

The Maya who accepted the new dogma creatively mixed the two religions so that their earth gods would not be forsaken. The Spanish, on the other hand, relocated, re-educated and re-enslaved the Maya so their lives began to replicate those of the Spanish except, of course, for their standard of living.

*Courtyard where Friar de Landa destroyed the Maya books and killed the Maya who resisted*

Because of his brutal treatment of the natives under the guise of an "inquisition," Landa was sent back to Spain where he stood trial and was ordered by the Pope to write an account of his time in the Yucatán. Ironically, his book, *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán*, is the only remaining account of how the Maya lived before the arrival of the Spanish.

## Pirates

Spaniards wishing to settle in the Yucatán were given free farms and Indians to work that land. Since there was no gold and the soil was poor, colonization was slow. The largest group of settlers was the priests.

Life along the seas was a bit more exciting. There were the privateers, the British, French and Dutch pirates who stole about 70% of all the gold leaving the New World (mostly South America) for Europe. The pirates needed ports to outfit and fix ships. Campeche was one such place.

The most famous of these men was Sir Francis Drake, who robbed $9 million worth of treasure from the Spanish fleets. For this he was knighted. On the other hand, the Spanish still call him "el Draque," after a Maya mythological boogeyman. A co-worker of Drake's was Captain Morgan, who did more work in Belize than the Yucatán but had an equally good/bad reputation as Drake.

*Sir Francis Drake*

When England gave up supporting piracy, Drake had died, but the famous Blackbeard continued to work the trade, though he held no discrimination against any country and robbed ships from everywhere. He then sold the goods to any purchaser with money, regardless of nationality. He made his beachside home in Quintana Roo and his descendents still live in Punta Allen about 95 mi (150 km) south of Cancún.

*Blackbeard*

Born around 1680 as Edward Teach, **Blackbeard** intimidated his opponents by appearing on deck wearing a three-cornered hat, numerous swords, knives and pistols and by lighting hemp he had woven around his beard. To add to the intimidation, his flag was the devil holding a spear pointing to a bleeding heart. He was finally killed in a bitter battle against Lieutenant Robert Maynard. Blackbeard was stabbed more than 20 times and shot five times before he succumbed, at which time Maynard cut off his head and hung it on the bow of the ship.

## Rebellions

The Spanish empire disintegrated after Napoleon invaded Spain in 1807. In Mexico, the fight for independence started three years later under the leadership of Father Miguel Hidalgo. A full-fledged revolution broke out, with Mexico winning independence from Spain in 1821.

In the Yucatán, the Maya took advantage of the weakening power of Europe and joined the fight for independence. When Agustin de Iturbide declared himself emperor and pronounced Mexico a republic, the Mexicans weren't happy. The new rulers were Spaniards. Those with mixed or Indian blood were inferior. Discontent and battle continued until, in 1824, the Yucatán, which at that time included the states of Campeche and Quntana Roo, the Chiapas and Guatemala, won its independence. The states were among the first of the Mexican federation.

Benito Juárez, one of Mexico's greatest heroes, became president and tried to unify the country, but the struggles never really ended. The white ruling class couldn't share power with the Indians. The Yucatán was declared a department ruled by the central government in Mexico City. Insurrection erupted and in 1838 the Yucatán was again declared independent. However, the central Mexican government wanted the Yucatán in the federation so Juárez sent Andres Quintana Roo to Mérida to work out an agreement. He succeeded and a treaty was signed.

*Benito Juárez*

However, Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, the next president of Mexico ignored the agreement, so again those in the Yucatán rebelled by removing all flags of Mexico from public buildings. Instead they flew the flag of the Yucatán. The central government placed embargos on the ports that blocked commerce and Santa Anna sent in an army that the Yucatecans quickly defeated. Mexico then gave the Yucatán self-rule. This treaty was singed in 1843.

The American-Mexican war broke out but the Yucatán refused to participate and announced its neutrality. But the Maya were still unhappy. The ruling group was Spanish hidalgos or criollos.

Being Castillano, a Spaniard from Spain, put you at the top of the social, economic and ruling class in Mexico. The criollos, those of pure Spanish blood born in America followed, and the mestizos who were of mixed

blood came next. Finally, the Indians, the peasant workers, existed at the bottom.

## Stephens & Catherwood

John Lloyd Stephens, an American lawyer who needed an extended vacation, went on a world tour that eventually ended in the Yucatán and Central America. He was chasing a rumor about ancient cities hidden in the jungles. Stephens' father was a congressman wanting to make political connections for the purpose of trade in Central America and he wanted a viable route for a canal that would shorten sailing times between the Atlantic and the Pacific. Although Stephens was unsuccessful in fulfilling his father's wishes, he managed to write a bestselling book, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatán*, which has stayed in print for almost 200 years. The illustrator was Frederick Catherwood. The book compelled archeologists to leave the comfort of their oak desks and do some field work.

As luck would have it, shortly after Stephens' book was published, the Caste War broke out in the Yucatán, halting professional exploration for almost 50 years.

## The Caste War, 1847-1901

The Caste War was mainly a fight over land. As the Spanish asserted control in the Yucatán and Guatemala, they set up a kind of feudal system, handing large estates (*haciendas*) out to their soldiers and bureaucrats. The Maya and other Indians (*peones*) worked on these haciendas, and were exploited mercilessly. They still are, by the descendents of the original landed aristocracy. But regularly the Maya continue to rise in revolt.

After Europeans took control of the Yucatán and created large estates, owned by them and later by criollos, the mestizos and Indians worked on these estates. In the process, the Maya lost ownership of traditional lands, which were mostly jungle that the elite considered unused. The estates grew crops, which were mostly agave, for export to Europe. The landowners produced a fiber from the agave that was made into rope, which in turn sold for a good price. Sugarcane too was seen as a lucrative cash crop.

The Spanish brought African slaves with them who declared themselves free after landing in the Yucatán. They settled in small towns called Palenques and assimilated with local Maya who were not on the estates. The offspring are called Zambo.

As the estates expanded, the sacred cenotes that had supplied villages with water for centuries fell into private ownership and the Indians had to pay for water. The cost of water and imposed church taxes led to extreme

poverty. The Indians were also often blamed for crimes and disasters they never committed. When three Maya were executed in Valladolid after protesting for land reform, the Indians rebelled by marching into Valladolid and butchering 85 people. They carried the mutilated bodies through the streets in a victory march. The Spaniards, in retaliation, captured a Maya leader and raped a 12-year old Indian girl.

The Maya went to war and succeeded in driving the non-Indians from the Yucatán except for those living in the cities of Mérida and Campeche.

However, at that time, Mexico had settled financially with the US after the Mexican-American war and could afford to arm their men heavily with new weapons. They sent troops into the Yucatán. By 1850, the Maya lost half the territory they'd won three years earlier.

In the southeast where the Maya still had control, they received a message from the "Talking Cross," which they believed was God communicating with them. The village of Chan Santa Cruz (now called Puerto Felipe Carrillo), where the apparition occurred, became a sacred pilgrim site and political center for resistance.

With the strategic port of Chan Santa Cruz being in Maya hands, the British who ruled Belize and traded at Chan Santa Cruz, considered the Yucatán an independent nation. Skirmishes continued for almost another 30 years until the Maya and the Mexican governor from the State of the Yucatán signed a peace and trading treaty that also gave the Maya an independent area from just north of Tulum to the Belize border and inland by a few hundred kilometers.

But the Maya themselves were split. Some disagreed with those following the Talking Cross and declared themselves independent. The Mexican government gave the separatists guns in exchange for autonomy under the Mexican umbrella. There were also the Icaiche Maya, who rebelled against the separatists, the Talking Cross and the Belize Maya.

The British signed a treaty in 1893 with Mexico that recognized the border at Chetumal between Mexico and Belize. The land to the north, including all land the Maya had claimed in their earlier treaty for independence, was considered Mexican. More war erupted until 1901 when Mexican troops marched into Chan Santa Cruz and stayed. General Ignacio Bravo telegraphed Mexico City on May 5th (Cinco de Mayo), saying the war was over. Although a few Maya resisted, hiding in the jungles and attacking undefended posts, it was measles and smallpox spread by the Mexican gun carriers that subdued the Maya.

It's still not over. Rebellions continue today in Guatemala and Mexico, as the recent uprising in the state of Chiapas shows. The Maya are the single greatest force of resistance to central (and often US-backed) authority in Central America and Mexico.

## 20th Century Events

World War I increased the need for rope, so "green gold" was planted throughout the Yucatán, creating a financial windfall for hacienda owners. It was once believed that more millionaires lived in Mérida than anywhere else in the New World. This wealth allowed for the building of railways and roads linking the Yucatán with the rest of Mexico.

With the Caste War pretty much over, those interested in the Maya ruins were the next wave of hidalgos to arrive. **Edward Thompson**, although not an archeologist, purchased the ruins of Chichén Itzá for $500 and attempted to excavate the treasures hidden in the cenote. Items he succeeded in retrieving included jade, rubber, pottery and jewelry. He donated them to the Harvard museum where they still remain on display.

*Sylvanus Morley*

One interesting archeologist with great enthusiasm for the ruins of the Yucatán was **Sylvanus Morley**, a skinny Harvard Archaeology grad with thick horn-rimmed glasses who was undoubtedly inspired by Stephen's book, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatán*. He hunted through the ruins of Tulum, Copan and Uaxactun. He studied the Maya and understood the calendric inscriptions better than anyone. Entranced by the Maya buildings, he lobbied the Carnegie Institute for money to restore Chichén Itzá, more for tourist purposes than scientific knowledge.

He also represented the Maya during negotiations with governing classes. But this was mostly as a cover, since he was an American espionage agent looking for pro-German operations and secret submarine bases in Mexico during WWI.

After the war Morley was given authority to oversee the excavations of numerous sites in Yucatán and Guatemala. This proved a bit too much work for him and in 1929 his workload was decreased to include only Chichén Itzá. Morley became weakened from recurring bouts of malaria, a terrible session of colitis and finally amoebic dysentery. Then his heart weakened. He went home and wrote numerous papers and the acclaimed

book, *The Ancient Maya.* It has been reprinted many times since his death in 1948, when he was just 65 years old.

## Land Reforms

Much to the credit of President Lazaro Cardenas (1934-1940), land reforms gave half of Quintana Roo, as well as large parcels in the Yucatán and Campeche, back to the Maya. Peace for the Maya was enjoyed for a few brief years. After WWII the price of sisel fell and haciendas went broke. Bank foreclosures were seen throughout the Yucatán and the peninsula went into a great depression with thousands of Indians starving to death.

Then in 1968 the government in Mexico City came up with the bright idea of a super resort area that would surpass even Acapulco. It would be developed along the Caribbean coast. President Don Luis Echeverria Alvarez and his associates bought up all the beachfront along the Yucatán and Quintana Roo and quickly made a fortune selling it to international developers.

In 1974 the silver birds started arriving, first in Cozumel and then in 1980 in Cancún. The hope was to dominate the tourist trade and this has pretty much happened. Over $3 billion corporate and government dollars have been spent building the resorts, with returns of about $6 billion per year. There are 144 hotels with 26,550 rooms available. The city employs over 400,000 workers and this will increase as the new condominiums start selling ($437,000 for 1,900 sq ft) and permanent residents need more services.

Even with the devastation of Hurricane Gilbert in 1988, Roxanne in 1995 and Wilma in 2005, Cancún was not compromised. Hoteliers started rebuilding before the last pane of glass crumpled to the beaches.

## Unions & the Egg War

The 1980s in Mexico saw high unemployment and an inflation rate of 400%. The Yucatán, except for the resorts, which were a great bargain to foreigners, suffered. Even though the resorts hired many workers, they were either underemployed or not earning enough to sustain a comfortable living. The resort owners took their profits out of Mexico to their own banks.

To pacify discontent, the government formed the Confederación de Trabadores de México to assist all Mexican workers. It turned out to be an organization that served the needs of the employer rather than the employee. In 1990 farm laborers from Fernandez Avicultural Farms tried to form a private union. Fighting in the streets was intense during a 140-day strike. Even local women became involved by providing strikers with food and water and occasionally battling strikebreakers.

The company, with the support of the governor, brought in state police and threatened the laborers with imprisonment or lifetime unemployment. The laborers were defeated.

The only concession they got was the **Festival of Cristo de las Ampollas**, Christ of the Blisters. The workers give thanks for their professions and, ironically, the festival includes participation by numerous unions.

Cancún in 1970 had a population of 117 people and by 1991 the population had grown to 300,000, then to 520,000 in 2008.

# Government

The Yucatán is one of 31 states that make up the United Mexican States. The Yucatán's governing body consists of the Executive, the Legislature or the Congress and the Judiciary. Everyone gets to vote and some seats are voted regionally while others are statewide.

The elected head of state is the Constitutional Governor who rules for a period of six years, with no possibility of a second term, unless he was an interim governor prior to elections. There have been 56 elections since independence with the last one in May 2007 when Ivonne Ortega Pacheco, representing the Institutional Revolutionary Party, was elected Governor. She is the first female to ever sit in this position in the Yucatán.

The Legislature, located in the capital city of Mérida, is composed of 25 local deputies, of whom 15 are elected by popular vote. They all serve for a three-year term and may run a second time.

The executive manages the day-to-day running of the state but they do not make or interpret any laws. The laws are made by the Legislature and are interpreted by the Judiciary.

The Yucatán is divided into 106 municipalities, each headed by an elected mayor.

## Governing Parties

Presently there are two major parties running in Mexico. They are the Institutional Revolutionary Party, the PRI, and the Party of the Democratic Revolution, the PRD.

The PRI has been in power nationally for more than 75 years. Referred to as el tricolor, their emblem uses red, white and green and is highly criti-

cized because the colors are the same as those of the country flag. It is a center- to right-leaning political party formed in 1929.

The PRD came out of the PRI. Due to corruption, the party split in 1989 with the leftists forming the Party of the Democratic Revolution, the PRD. They included moderates from the Mexican Communist Party (formed 1919), the Mexican Socialist Party (formed 1988) and the Mexican Workers' Party (formed in 1977).

The National Action Party, PAN, founded in 1939, is considered center-right and was first formed by strong Roman Catholic conservatives. Since its beginning, PAN has waffled back and forth from left to right, depending on what problems they faced at that given moment. It tried but failed to form a coalition with the PRD in the 2007 state elections.

There are four other smaller parties in the state that, combined, have taken up to 3.5% of the vote. All together the seven parties make for confusing politics.

## Economy

Traditionally, the Yucatán's economy depended on the export of sisal (agave) used for making rope. But synthetic fibers developed since the 1960s have eliminated any need for this commodity.

To replace the sisal industry, textile production developed as maquiladora operations similar to those along the US-Mexico border. Recently it has seen slow days due to the low cost of labor in Asia. On the other hand, the aerospace industry has security risk issues with Asia so the industry has grown to a $16 million business employing 10,000 people across Mexico, with some in Yucatán. Jewelry exports to the US rose to $1.3 billion in 2006, a jump of 11% from the previous year; export of cellular phones was up to $32 million and seafood was at $34 million.

Yucatán's economy has been on the upswing, with trade tripling in the last 10 years. Figures are hard to find for the Yucatán itself but Mexico in 2006 exported goods worth $1,229.7 billion to the US and imported a total of $865.6 billion. Mexico's trade balance on the world market left exports just a tad below imports. This means Mexico, in 2006, saw its smallest deficit in this century. Since transportation systems have been upgraded at the airports, ports and along the highways, transporting goods has become more affordable, thus making investment more attractive.

The tourism infrastructure has grown, with large hotels, restaurants, bars, entertainment and tour companies employing English-speaking service workers. The income from tourism rose from $1.3 million in 1970 to $6.3 million in 1989 to $3.758 billion during the first three months of

2007 (the most recent figures available). Today, Cancún alone sees $6 billion a year from tourism, which is 20% of the nations tourism dollar.

Even the medical industry in Mérida, considered comparable in quality to the US and Canada, is trying to attract retired foreign citizens with public and private medical services that are reimbursable by insurers.

***Maquiladoras:*** Because of the North American Free Trade Agreement, taxes and customs fees on goods produced and shipped from Mexico are almost nonexistent. Maquiladoras, towns along the Mexican/American border and in the Yucatán, employ workers for as little as 50¢ up to $2 an hour for 10 hours a day, six days a week. The cost of living in these towns is high so it leaves the workers with a lower standard of living than what is seen in the rest of the country. The factory owners are mostly American, Japanese and European. Besides cheap labor, Mexico has few ecological restraints, so low construction and operation costs help keep profits high. The US and Canada have lost millions of jobs because of this and in turn millions of dollars in tax revenue.

The average annual earnings were $4,826 in 2006. Secretaries make about $4,000 a year, a laborer earns $1 per hour and senior managers earn around $30,000 per year. The cost of gasoline is $2.88 per US gallon and a small house rents for $250 per month and up.

The adult unemployment rate for the 1st quarter of 2007 was 1.9%. There is a social assistance program in place to help the unemployed. Contributions by workers are about 20% of their salary.

In 2006, $23 million of foreign investment came to the Yucatán, resulting in 90 new businesses opening. The most significant projects were the Thermoelectric Plant at Valladolid and the $100 million Yucatán Country Club in Cancún.

# People & Culture

## Maya

About half the Yucatán's population is Maya, who speak Yucatec Maya as their first language and Spanish as their second. Some speak English as

their third. Ninety percent of all family names in Yucatán are from the Maya language. There are about 614,000 Maya living in the state.

Although they practice Christianity, the Maya include their own traditions, such as observing events in the 260-day calendar and communicating with their ancestors. Auspicious names and dates are observed and they place importance on the earth, its caves, lakes and volcanoes.

*Maya family, Tankan (Henrique Matos)*

## Spanish

In the colonial social hierarchy, those of pure Spanish ancestry born in Spain, were at the top of the heap, holding all top administrative and military positions.

During the revolution, the criollos, those of pure Spanish ancestry born in the New World, took over. The word, which originated in Spain during the Reconquista, when the Spanish reclaimed the Iberian Peninsula from foreign domination, means cleanliness of blood. In Mexico, this means no Indian lineage.

## Mestizo

Those of mixed Spanish and Indian blood who traditionally speak Spanish, worship in the Catholic Church and dominate the middle classes are mestizo. Adding to the gene pool of this group in the Yucatán are Lebanese, who came during the boom but stayed around after the bust. In Mexico, 60% of the population is mestizo.

## African

Between 1519 and 1650 about 120,000 African slaves were brought into Mexico, mostly to the Gulf Coast area. Another 200,000 were added to the

pool by the end of the Colonial period. They assimilated, marrying both criollos and Indians.

## Mennonites

There are not many Mennonites in Mexico, but their presence is notable around Campeche and Chetumal.

Originally from Switzerland, the Mennonites, were persecuted, so they searched for religious freedom, first across Europe, Russia and then in the Americas. By the end of World War I, they had migrated as far south as Mexico and, by the early 1950s, were looking at Belize.

The Mennonites are distinctive; the women wear ankle-length dresses and head coverings in the form of straw hats, bonnets or kerchiefs and the men wear bibbed overalls and straw hats. Their farms are efficiently run and the Mennonites are often in towns selling their produce. They operate their own schools, banks and churches.

# Geography

Born from the oceans in the Pleiocene age, 13 million years ago, the Yucatán Peninsula, with the Gulf of Mexico to the north and the Caribbean to its south, is a flatland jungle with an elevation of about 500 feet. Within the peninsula are the states of Campeche and Quintana Roo and part of Tobasco, the entire country of Belize and part of Guatemala. The Mexican part of the peninsula covers 52,000 square miles (135,000 square km).

The 950 miles (1,500 km) of Caribbean shoreline sparkles with white sand beaches and features offshore coral reefs. The inland jungles are dotted with limestone caves and dry underground rivers; some have caved in to form cenotes or sinkholes.

The Maya believed that the land where they lived sat on the back of a turtle that floated in the sea.

Mountains are unknown to the state except for the Hills in Campeche that rise up 1,000 feet (300 meters). However, due to water and plate movements, ripples from old sea beds form small valleys with low ridges.

The land includes rainforests, mangroves along the coasts and dry scrub brush or thorn forests in the northwest. About 10% of the vegetation is endemic and it hosts a large number of endemic reptiles and amphibians. There are about 290 bird species (two endemic) and 96 mammals, including the jaguar.

About 65 million years ago, an asteroid or comet hit the Yucatán Peninsula, then mostly underwater. The resulting crater, over six miles (10 km) wide, is called the **Chicxulub Crater**. It is one of the major meteor craters in the world, although some paleontologists believe meteors of comparable size hit the earth every 62 million years or so. Its impact was equivalent to one trillion tons of TNT exploding. The Chicxulub caused a global darkness that changed weather conditions and in turn is thought to have killed off the dinosaurs. The result was that mammals were able to flourish. Thanks Chicxulub!

Because it lies deep under sediment, it wasn't until 1978 that the crater was found. Glen Penfield was looking for oil at the time and became suspicious when he found an excess of iridium and pieces of shocked quarts that contained tiny pieces of weathered glass. This combination of chemicals is seen only in meteorites. Penfield studied aerial surveys of the area and found that there was an "extraordinary symmetry," which later proved to be a complete circle, rimmed by a ring of cenotes.

### Earth's Time

490-443 million years ago: Oceans cover North America and then drain as land rises. Corals and clams evolve.

443-417 million years ago: The earth floods and the seas recede leaving salt deposits. Sea life is dominated by corals and arthropods. Fish develop jaws!

417-354 million years ago: Appellation Mountains form in North America and South America takes on its present position. This is the age when armored fish, lung fish and sharks develop. An ozone layer forms around the earth.

354-290 million years ago: The continents collide and the climate cools. Cockroaches are born. The first reptiles appear. Trees, club mosses and ferns evolve.

290-248 million years ago: Glaciations occur and huge deserts abound; some corals become extinct. Herbivores and carnivores, terrestrial and aquatic divisions develop.

248-144 million years ago: Continents separate and the climate warms; 75% of the earth's reptiles and amphibians die. Atlantic Ocean forms and the western mountains on the American continent develop. Many dinosaurs disappear. First frogs, toads and salamanders appear. Small mammals like shrews appear.

144-65 million years ago: Continents take their present shape. More mountains form and the climate warms. The surviving dinosaurs disappear when the asteroid hits.

65-34 million years ago: Continental plates shift. Horses, rhinos and camels, as well as whales and dolphins develop.

34-5 million years ago: Oceans established. Early primates develop, whales and walruses evolve, as do herons, ducks, eagles, hawks and crows.

5-1.8 million years ago: Isthmus of Panama rises and separates Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Plates keep shifting. Primates evolve.

1.8 million-10,000 years ago: 30% of the earth is covered in ice. Moose, elephant, musk ox, saber-tooth cat and the sloth are now present.

10,000 years to now: Glaciers recede. Americas are occupied by humans. Tourists evolve and roam the earth.

## Environments

The Yucatán is mainly a semi-arid flatland surrounded on two sides by water. There is a small section of scrub on the northern coast containing the spiny or thorny bean-family trees such as the acacias, tamarinds and columnar cacti. The area is the driest part of the peninsula and well worth the time to visit for amateur botanists.

Inland is no less interesting with its deciduous jungles and lower forests. The southeasterly forests are moist and have some species common to the rainforests. This is the wettest part of the peninsula.

The southern lowlands are tropical and subtropical. The Rio Champotón flows through the valley and Maya first built the city of Edzná along its shores. It flows into the Gulf of Mexico just south of Campeche.

There is an inland section of land that stretches through the Karst hills from Campeche to the western part of Quintana Roo. Known as the Puuc Region, it includes the ruins of Uxmal, Edzná and Chichén Itzá. Puuc means hill in Maya.

### Offshore

Beyond the coastal sands and high-rise hotels along the Caribbean is a **barrier reef** – the longest unbroken strip of coral in the hemisphere, and second in size only to Australia's Great Barrier Reef. It provides 600 miles (1,000 km) of natural breakwater, starting in the Yucatán, running down off Belize and over to the Bay Islands of Honduras. Mexico's section in Quintana Roo has an extensive fringing reef and the **Banco Chinchorro Atoll**. It is protected by the 346,187 acres (144,360 ha) of the **Banco Chincorro Biosphere Reserve**.

On the other side of the peninsula, in the Gulf of Mexico, are about 20 small reefs that run from Vera Cruz to Campeche. The **Alcarnes Reef** in the northern section covers about 250 sq miles (650 sq km) and includes

an atoll-shaped reef. Fifty percent of Mexico's reefs are endangered due to over-fishing and pollution.

Composed of organic skeletal deposits from both plants and animals, this land of calcium carbonate (limestone) is a fascinating world to explore. Between the reef and coastline is a rim of mangrove swamp. Not good for human habitation, but rich ecologically, it hosts hundreds of species of birds and protects as many types of fish.

*Coral reef*

The coral that makes up the barrier reef has been forming for millions of years. As the coral reef develops, the number and types of animals in and around the reef also changes.

Coral is a small polyp living in temperatures above 21°C (70°F). It survives in saline water down to about 125 feet (38 m) where it consumes minute organisms and dissolved gasses. They form group colonies, attaching themselves to rocky coasts and other coral. The cup-like cavities found in coral were once occupied by living polyps.

The calcium carbonate skeletons bond into three forms: fringing reefs, barrier reefs and atolls. Some of these formations descend to 5,000 feet (1,500 m) below sea level. Coral does not grow at that depth. Scientists believe the sea levels were once lower, which allowed the formation of the reefs. As the sea levels rose, successive platforms developed.

**Fringing reefs** extend outward from the shore of a mainland or island like a shelf. The outer edge occasionally rises like a saucer forming a rim that is cut through by channels.

**Barrier reefs** are characterized by a shallow channel or lagoon between reef and shore. Finally, **atolls** are ring- or horseshoe-shaped reefs that surround lagoons. They may have breaks in them through which the tide can pass. A number of small atolls form rings that surround larger lagoons. Some atolls originally surrounded volcanic islands that subsided below the surface, leaving the encircling coral reef.

**Coral islands** are an intermediate form – atolls with volcanic rock close to the surface. Wave action pushes up coral sand over the reef. This is poor soil for most plants but palm trees and a few other salt-resistent plants can adapt to it.

As the most recent glaciers melted, the sea rose and the Caribbean Coral Reef ecological system became what we see today: a marine biological museum protected from the ravishes of a raging sea by coral walls. This museum houses millions of fish between its mountains, mountains that are both dead and alive.

*Black coral,* now protected, grows 1 millimeter (.039 inch) every hundred years.

## Parks of the Yucatán

The National Institute of Archaeology and History tries against all odds to preserve new archeological findings but development usually eats up valuable information before sites can be saved. This is understandable since every mound in the Yucatán and Belize to the south is a Maya ruin and people need accommodations and buildings for business. On the other hand, tourism has pressured the government to preserve these historical artifacts.

During the 1990s the INAH pushed forward with their water exploration and had numerous archeologists trained in underwater research. They first focused on sunken Spanish ships lost in the waters of the Gulf during the 1600s. Another very significant project was to map on- and offshore archeological sites both pre- and post-Spanish. This has resulted in the protection and study of sites, some as old as 10,000 years. The major obstacles are lack of funding and of qualified archeologists.

The System of Natural Protected Areas (SINAP), in conjunction with the National Ecology Institute (INE), attempts to care for national parks, ecological reserves and marine parks in Mexico. These agencies are chronically under-funded, resulting in runaway pollution and poaching. Because no money is available, many small communities have taken over the care of these biospheres.

One of the major ecological threats is the building of resorts and the pollution resulting from them. In 1992, Chichén Itzá had 605,236 visitors; in 2000 there were 1,248,817. Uxmal, in 1992, had 187,566 paying visitors; this increased to 383,523 in 2000. In the last eight years, the visitor's entry fees have more than doubled but the money isn't used for protection of sensitive areas.

Travelers should always strive to make their impact as small as possible, and force the tour companies to do the same. This will often mean a higher-priced ticket.

### Parks & Sites

**Aktun Chen**, 10 miles (16 km) north of Tulum and 2.4 miles (4 km) south of Akumal, is an underground cave system about five million years old

with colorful stalagmites and stalactites and a cenote. The largest cave is 1,900 feet (600 m) long.

**Alacranes Reef**, 62 miles (100 km) north of Progreso, has been a natural reserve since 1994 and is comprised of five islands: Desterrada, Blanca, Muerto, Perez and Pajaros.

*Bahía de Chetumal*

**Bahía de Chetumal**, on the west cost of the bay near the mouth of the Hondo River, is a mangrove-rimmed lagoon featuring manatees, birds and canals that lead to Lake Bacalar.

**Calakmul Biosphere** is in the state of Campeche near the base of the Yucatán Peninsula. It borders Guatemala and has 1.8 million acres of jungle under its protection. Besides ocelots, howler monkeys, tapirs, coatis. toucans, green parrots and jaguars, it protects mahogany, strangler figs, ceibas and chicle trees. It also features a partly excavated Maya ruin that was one of the largest ever built.

*Cenote Azul*

**Cenote Azul** is at the village of Bacalar near Laguna Bacalar in the southwestern area of the peninsula. The crystal clear waters of the cenote have a depth of 288 feet (90 m) and a width of 640 feet (200 m), making it the largest cenote in the Yucatán.

**Cenote del Cocodrillo Dorado**, near the Rio Hondo and Bacalar, is a sinkhole with cliffs and caves close by.

**Chankanab Bay National Park**, near Cozumal, is excellent for snorkeling.

*Chinchorro Reef*

**Chinchorro Reef**, in the Caribbean just north of the Belize border, is a diver's paradise with numerous shipwrecks to explore.

**El Eden Ecological Reserve**, about 30 miles (48 km) northwest of Cancún, is a privately owned 500,000-acre reserve dedicated to research.

**Garraf Oacuten National Park**, on Isla Mujeres north of Cancún, has coral reefs plunging from 12 to 1,000 feet deep (4-300 m). However, the coral is no longer growing so few fish are attracted to the area.

**Hampolol Wildlife Station**, 8.7 miles (14 km) north of Campeche, covers 250 acres of jungle dedicated to research and education. Birds without Borders is involved with this project.

**Isla Contoy** or the **Island of Birds** features 60-70 species of marine birds, including wild frigates. The island is also popular with turtles. The 435-acre island, 25 miles (40 km) north of Cancún, is four miles long and 22 yards wide (6.4 km x 21 m). Visitation limits are in effect so if you wish to come here, book early.

**Isla Cozumel**, in the Caribbean south of Cancún, has 18 miles (24 km) of protected coastline with coral reefs. It is the largest inhabited island in Mexico.

**Laguna Bacalar**, just out of Chetumal, is also known as the Lake of Seven Colors. It is 26 miles (42 km) long and 1.2 miles (two km) wide, with Fort San Felipe on its shorline.

**Pac Chen** is 15 miles (25 km) north of the Maya ruins of Cobà, and is a locally managed Maya village that is practicing ethno-tourism, giving visitors an ethnic experience. They have a zipline; visitors can also rappel

into an underground cenote. At the end of that fun experience, they are served a traditional Maya meal. Tourism has enriched this tiny community, enabling them to build a clinic and school with the profits.

**Punta Laguna**, 6.2 miles (10 km) north of Cobà, is a private museum park managed by a small Maya community. It displays Maya agricultural methods.

*Flamingos on Rio Lagartos*

**Rio Lagartos**, on the coast, is north of Izamal, has mangroves, salt marshes and coastal lagoons. It focuses on the study and conservation of the pink flamingo. There are about 8,000 flamingos living within I.N.T.S.-protected canals and mangroves. You will also see pelicans, seagulls, herons, egrets and spoonbills. This is a biologically-sensitive reserve that employs locally trained guides and interpreters.

**Rio Celestun Biosphere Reserve**, on the Gulf of Mexico 40 miles (65 km) west of Mérida, is 150,000 acres of salt ponds, and mangrove swamps and supports the nesting ground of the pink flamingos. This is a biologically sensitive reserve that employs locally trained guides and interpreters.

**Rio Hondo**, on the Mexico/Belize border, offers 77 miles (125 km) of jungle river preserve with herons, river turtles and manatees.

**Sian Ka'an**, just south of Tulum National Park, is a bird-watcher's delight and the largest protected area in Quintana Roo. The carefully planned

*Sian Ka'an (Tim flickr)*

development has made this a true "green" area that includes bays, forests, lagoons, reefs and cenotes. There are also 23 unrestored Maya ruins. The reserve hires only local guides specifically trained in English and biology.

**Tres Rios Ecological Park** is just south of Cancún and features eight cenotes, all at ground level. This is not open to the general public – you must be a guest at the hacienda to enjoy the park.

**Tulum National Park**, just south of Playa del Carmen, has 1,640 acres of ruins and beach.

**Xel-Há Lagoon National Park**, just south of Playa del Carmen, is a freshwater bay adjacent to the ocean where salt- and freshwater creatures come in contact. The park has 100 species of birds, 350 species of plants and 90 species of marine creatures. White and loggerhead turtles are studied and visitors, if here at the correct time of year, can watch their nesting and hatching. Although the park boasts about being green, be aware it is in fact a commercial theme park.

**Xcaret**, originally a Maya city called Pole, is another commercial theme park, located just out of Playa del Carmen. It sits on a natural cove and features underground rivers, a butterfly pavilion, a turtle farm and an interactive aquarium. At night there are cultural plays, dances and a horse show.

## Archeological Sites

The Yucatán, like Belize, has a Maya pyramid under every mound. Below is a list that includes most sites in Yucatán, but not all. If you see 10 out of the list, you'll be Maya'd out. I have covered the major sites in depth (see page 99). **Chichén Itzá** is a World Heritage Site and now one of the wonders of the world. **Uxmal** is almost as impressive as Chichén Itzá and, if ruins are important to you, it should not be missed. My favorite is **Calakmul**, tucked into the jungle and quite difficult to get to unless you join a tour or have a car.

# Climate

| CANCÚN - AVERAGE TEMPERATURE | |
|---|---|
| 105 days above 32°C/90°F (mostly June to September) | |
| January | 23°C/74°F |
| February | 23°C/74°F |
| March | 25°/78°F |
| April | 26°C/80°F |
| May | 27°C/82°F |
| June, July, August, September | 28°C/84°F |
| October | 27°C/82°F |
| November | 25°C/78°F |
| December | 24°C/76°F |
| **MÉRIDA - AVERAGE TEMPERATURE** | |
| 238 days above 42°C/90°F | |
| January | 23°C/74°F |
| February | 23°C/74°F |
| March | 26°C/80°F |
| April | 27°C/82°F |
| May | 29°C/85°F |
| June | 28°C/84°F |
| July | 28°C/84°F |
| August | 28°C/84°F |
| September | 27°C/82°F |
| October | 26°C/80°F |
| November | 25°C/78°F |
| December | 23°C/74°F |
| **CAMPECHE - AVERAGE TEMPERATURE** | |
| 19 days above 32°C/90°F | |
| January | 22°C/73°F |
| February | 23°C/74°F |
| March | 25°C/78°F |
| April | 25°C/78°F |

| | |
|---|---|
| May | 28°C/83°F |
| June | 27°C/82°F |
| July | 26°C/80°F |
| August | 27°C/82°F |
| September | 26°C/80°F |
| October | 25°C/78°F |
| November | 23°C/74°F |
| December | 21°C/72°F |
| **CHETUMAL - AVERAGE TEMPERATURE** | |
| 59 days above 32°C/90°F | |
| January | 22°C/73°F |
| February | 24°C/76°F |
| March | 25°C/78°F |
| April | 26°C/80°F |
| May | 27°C/81°F |
| June | 27°C/81°F |
| July | 27°C/81°F |
| August | 27°C/81°F |
| September | 27°C/81°F |
| October | 26°C/80°F |
| November | 23°C/74°F |
| December | 23°C/74°F |

The Yucatán has two rainy seasons, the first between April and July and the second between October and January. Some rains are torrential. During a wet year, the inland areas are more likely to see sun than the coastal areas.

Hurricane season runs from June to December. When a hurricane is forming, a low pressure area develops in the upper atmosphere. Then the tropical waters of the Atlantic warm to over 80°F down to a depth of 200 feet. The heat of the water causes a circulation pattern in the winds to accelerate. When the wind speed is less than 40 mph (64 km), the phenomenon is called a tropical depression, but when the wind speed is higher, it becomes a hurricane. Only 5% of the hurricanes that form in the western mid-Atlantic ever reach the Yucatán.

The great Hurricane of 1780, also known as the Hurricane San Calixto II, blew through the Caribbean and killed 22,000 people.

During a hurricane, waves can reach 16 feet (five m) in height and more. All boats are moored. Occasionally, hurricanes pass 200 miles (300 km) north or south of the Yucatán but still cause destructive wave action along the shores.

On the bright side, a good emergency evacuation plan is in place and many resort owners keep in contact with the hurricane center in Miami, Florida so that evacuation occurs before the storm arrives.

**SAFFIR-SIMPSON HURRICANE SCALE**

- Category 5: 156 mph/250 km/h with a storm surge of 18 ft/5.5 m.
- Category 4: 131-155 mpg/210-249 km/h with a storm surge of 13-18 ft/4-5.5 m.
- Category 3: 111-130 mph/178-209 km/h with a storm surge of 9-12 ft/2.7-3.7 m.
- Category 2: 96-110 mph/154-177 km/h with a storm surge of 6-8 ft/1.8-2.4 m.
- Category 1: 74-95 mph/119-153 km/h with a storm surge of 4-5 ft/1.2-1.5 m.
- Tropical storms: 39-73 mph/63-117 km/h.

## Hurricanes of the Yucatán

1893: **Cheniere Caminada** killed almost 2,000 people mostly from the storm surge that resulted after the 135 mph winds passed through.

1931: A hurricane hit Chetumal and Belize City and killed 2,500 people.

1934: Central America hurricane killed 1,000-3,000 people and racked up $2.6 million worth of damage. It went through Cancún and over to the Gulf of Mexico two days later.

1951: **Charlie** hit Cozumel at 130 mph/215 km/h and killed more than 250 people. It weakened to a category 1 after leaving Cozumel.

1955: **Janet** destroyed Chetumal with winds of 150 mph.

1966: **Inez** went north to the US and then changed direction to brush the Yucatán along the Gulf.

1967: **Beulah** was a category 5 that blew 160 mph winds/260 km/h and killed 58 people.

1972: **Agnes** became a category 1 after leaving the Gulf of Mexico.

1974: **Carmen** hit Chetumal as a category 4.

1980: **Allan** was one of the strongest on record with winds up to 190 mph/305 km/h. It killed 261 people.

1988: **Gilbert** became a category 5 with winds up to 185 mph when it hit the peninsula, but weakened as it blew over to the Gulf. It killed 341 people.

1990: **Diana** was a tropical storm when it hit the peninsula but by the time it hit Campeche it was a category 2 and it managed to kill 139 people.

1995: **Opal** blew for a few days before hitting the Bay of Campeche as a category 2 storm but still managed to kill a total of 59 people, 19 in Mexico.

1995: **Roxanne** hit Cozumel first with its highest category 3 winds and then did an unusual turn and hit the Bay of Campeche.

1998: **Mitch** was a tropical storm when it crossed the Bay of Campeche. It then blew through most of Central America, causing about 9,000 deaths.

2000: **Keith** weakened after leaving Belize but strengthened again when it hit the Bay of Campeche.

2002: **Isidore** hit Mérida with 125 mph winds and stayed in the vicinity for 36 hours.

2004: **Ivan** moved across the Gulf of Mexico and on up to the US, causing $19.2 billion worth of damage and killing 92 people.

2005: **Emily** swept across the Yucatán as a category 4, causing $410 million in damage.

2005: **Wilma** caused a total of $30.7 billion in damage, which made it the fifth-costliest storm ever recorded in the Atlantic. It killed 23 people.

2005: **Rita** became the most intense tropical cyclone ever observed in the Gulf of Mexico. It caused $11.3 billion in damage and killed 120 people.

2005: **Cindy** was relatively mild with 75 mph/125 km/h winds that killed just one person. By the time it hit the Gulf it was classified as a tropical storm but by the time it worked its way to the states it was again a hurricane.

2005: **Stan** was the 11th hurricane of the season although not all 11 hit Mexico. Stan caused about 2000 deaths, 80 of these directly from the storm.

2007: **Dean** hit the Yucatán with 166 mph/270 km/h winds that caused $3.8 billion worth of damage and 39 deaths.

# Plant Life

## Mangroves

Mangrove forests are found along the coasts and each of the species plays an important, slightly different, part in the ecological system.

*Red mangroves*

Mangroves are usually, but not always, found running parallel to coral reefs. It is believed that because the plants like brackish, nutrient-rich water, in a symbiotic relationship they clarify it for the coral that prefers clear, nutrient-poor water.

Some mangroves are able to filter the salt water through their root system while others release the salt through the pores of their leaves or a gland near the stem end.

Besides providing a protective environment for hundreds of fish, mangroves are home to both birds and land animals. If birding is your thing, the mangrove swamp is where you will be happiest.

But mangroves help humans too. They keep soil erosion to a minimum and they absorb some of the harsh wave action caused by hurricanes and storms. The wood from the trees is used to make traps and nets; it can also be burned for fuel.

**Red mangroves**, found closest to or in the water, trap silt and rotting leaves around their roots. As the debris turns into soil, the red mangrove dies (after sending seeds to other parts of the area) and the **white mangrove** moves in. The red is a threatened species, easy to spot because of the numerous prop roots that arch in the air, winding themselves around other roots, thus forming impenetrable thickets but providing stability. The roots also gather oxygen to feed the underground parts. The red mangroves stand up to 60 feet (20 m) high, with leaves that grow to five inches in length.

White mangroves that can grow to 40 feet (12 m) high are very salt tolerant and have a unique root system that grows above high-water levels. Seedpods develop on the ends of these roots and, after they ripen, fall into the ground and grow. The roots that are sitting above the water also facilitate the exchange of gases. The leaves are thick and about three inches long. At the stem of each leaf is a gland that helps rid the plant of excess salt.

**Black mangroves**, another threatened species, grow above the high water line, usually in the muddy land next to the ocean and above the red or white species, although not above the buttonwoods. The blacks cover large areas with their smaller green foliage. Each leaf is furry on the bottom and grows to about three inches in length. The spreading branches have grey-brown aerial root formations called pneumatophores, hanging like snakes and sucking up the oxygen. Black mangroves have white flowers with four petals that produce a fruit about 1.5 inches long.

**Buttonwood** or **button mangrove** (a subspecies of the white mangrove) resides above all other mangroves in soil that is low in salinity. The four-inch leaves are thinner than those of other mangroves and the flowers are reddish-brown clusters of pea-sized florets.

## Scrub or Thorn Forests

*Leather ferns*

**Leather Ferns:** Once the mangroves have completed their job, the thin salty soil provides a bed for grasses and giant leather ferns, with coarse fronds reaching 10 feet around. The ferns are well stabilized and the wind spreads their cinnamon colored spore. The large salt-loving ferns are found on the Caribbean with names such as golden leather, mangrove fern or swamp fern.

**Salicornia:** Derived from Greek, the word means salt-horn. The plant looks like a handful of small pickles emerging from the earth and is thus occasionally called the pickle-weed. When eaten, it is the salt that's appealing. A yellowish flower grows on the end of a stem, making it look like it has edema.

**Fish poison tree**, also called the Jamaica dogwood, has a bark poisonous to fish and was traditionally used to sedate fish so they could easily be gathered. The wood is hard and heavy, almost impossible to carve or drive a spike into. The plants have long, thin compound leaves and white to purple flowers with thin red stripes.

**Balche** is an ornamental bean-family member that produces a single seed per pod. The seeds were once collected and fermented by the Maya. The bitter drink, also called Balche, was used in religious ceremonies. The trees have compound leaves evenly disbursed along the branches and purple flowers that bloom in October, at the end of rainy season.

**Tamarind** has feathered foliage and tiny red and yellow flowers. It produces huge flat, brown bean pods seen everywhere in Latin America. Before the pods dry out, they are collected and used for cooking and to make a refreshing drink.

**Acacia** has orange, marble-sized, aromatic flower clusters and small feathery leaves that grow beside long thorns, so common with all acacia. The roots host bacteria that fix atmospheric nitrogen into the ground. The wood is tough enough to be used for fence posts.

**Strangler fig** is actually an epiphyte, not a true parasite, and it chokes other living trees, although it photosynthesizes its own energy. It begins growing when a seed lands on a host tree, usually deposited by a bird or insect. A tiny root starts to twist its way down the trunk of the host. As the root moves down, it develops leaves and branches and more roots, which eventually wind around the host's trunk. The strangler fig lives off its host until the nutritional value has been devoured. The plant produces a small fig-like fruit, bitter to human taste but delectable for some birds and animals.

*Strangler fig*

## Coastal Dunes

**Goat-foot morning glory** is a creeping vine able to tolerate salt air. Therefore, it grows on beaches and is one of the first sand stabilizers that grows on the seaside of dunes.

**Sea grape**, also a sand stabilizer, is a thick-leaved plant that grows to 24 feet/eight m in height. The bark is smooth and the plant produces a cluster of grape-like fruits that are picked and boiled into jam.

# Trees & Shrubs

*Sapodilla*

**Sapodilla or chicozapote trees:** Sapodilla gave us chewing gum. The legend goes that in 1866 General Santa Ana brought from South America a substance that he gave to a New York dentist, Dr. Tom Adams. Adams worked with it and one year later came up with the product we now know as chewing gum.

This tree produces cream-colored latex and grows to about 150 feet (45 m). The latex makes the wood of the tree rot-resistant. The Maya knew this and used the wood for door lintels at some of their temples. Because of its resistance to decomposition, these lintels are still in good condition today. The trunks of the trees are also quite pliable so they bend in the wind and do not suffer great damage when hit by hurricanes.

**Poisonwood Trees:** Poisonwood, related to poison ivy, should be identifiable and avoided because its alkaloid sap causes skin irritations, sometimes quite severe. The tree grows to about 25 feet (seven m) and has a short trunk, stout limbs and drooping branches. The bark is reddish brown with thin oily patches of sap on it.

The leaves cluster in groups of five, all about six to 10 inches (15 to 25 cm) long. The leaves of the poisonwood are smooth and glossy on top but dull and pale underneath. They are broad at the base, thin at the ends and may be blotched with irregular black spots. The plant produces yellowish berries. There is almost always a gumbo limbo tree growing near a poisonwood. This is convenient as the gumbo limbo tree's sap is the antidote to the poisonwood's infection.

**Ziricote trees**, also called ironwood, are so dense that the wood sinks in water. Ziricote grow up to 100 feet (30 m) and are found in the drier areas of the tropics. Their bright orange flowers, shaped like a forget-me-not, make them easily recognizable. Many carvings, purchased as souvenirs, are made from ziricote.

**Calabash trees** have white tubular flowers and gourd-shaped fruits that grow out of the trunks and limbs. There can be up to 100 flowers or gourds growing on a tree at any one time. It takes seven months after pollination for the fruit to ripen. Dried gourds are painted and sold as souvenirs.

**Cacao** plants worldwide produce over a million tons of chocolate powder every year. This little evergreen that grows to about 25 feet (7½ m) likes a warm humid climate with little rain. The tree produces an oblong fruit, 12 inches (30 cm) long. After ripening, the fruit may be yellow, red, purple or green and is usually harvested after the wet season. Each fruit will produce between 20 and 60 seeds that grow in five even rows. The five-petal pink flower has five smaller yellow petals inside. The flower opens in the morning and lives for only one day. However, the plant produces flowers all year. The tree likes shade and starts to produce at three or four years of age. An adult grove, one acre in size, can produce 300 to 1,000 pounds (136-450 kg) of cacao per year for up to 50 years.

*Pods on a cacao tree*

Once the cacao pods are picked they are left to ferment in order to reduce the bitterness. The pods are then dried, roasted and shelled. The nib inside is ground, sugar is added, and finally chocolate as we know it is ready.

**Frangipani**, also called the lei flower, is part of the oleander family. It is a tree or shrub that grows to 30-40 feet (10-12 m) and has branches with a wide reach. The narrow clustered leaves have a smooth leathery texture. But it's the fragrant, delicate flowers that come in white, yellow, pink and red and make the plant so attractive. Once in bloom, the flowers can last for up to three months. However, for those insects looking for food, the frangipani has no nectar. Some Aztec tribes used the flower as a salve for skin disorders. Nicaragua took the frangipani for its national flower.

**Mahogany trees** stand well over 75 feet (25 m) tall and the foliage offers a great amount of shade. The trunk has a red, scaly bark and there are four to eight leathery leaves on each branch. Tiny white flowers appear in clusters followed by a pear-shaped fruit that has noticeable grooves along its length. The fruit produces wing-shaped seeds.

Mahogany's hard wood is used for cabinets, expensive household furnishings, caskets and musical instruments. It is also used as a veneer. In the Yucatán, it has been harvested close to extinction and rejuvenation attempts have not been very successful.

*Ceiba tree*

**Ceiba trees** are deciduous giants that can be identified by their gray, fan-tailed trunks. The trees grow to 150 feet (50 m) and are home not only to birds and animals but also to many aerial plants. The trees shed their leaves during dry season and the seedpods dangle for months from the branches. The pods, filled with a cotton like fluff called kapok, are what the tree, until the 1950s, was valued for. Kapok is buoyant and water-resistant so, until it was replaced with modern Styrofoam, it was used to stuff life preservers. Kapok was also used as stuffing for upholstered automobile seats.

The Maya considered the tree sacred and thought it connected the center of the earth to the heavens. They used the tree only for dugout canoes.

**Palm trees** come in a number of varieties with the **cahune**, **banana**, **palmetto**, **silver thatch**, **queen** and **royal** palms being most common in the Yucatán. Since lethal yellow (a palm tree bacteria) has invaded and killed many of the trees (mostly the royal), landowners are replanting with the dwarf, a species that is resistant to lethal yellow.

Palms like the coast although they can be seen at elevations of up to 2,000 feet (600 m) and miles inland. They grow up to 100 feet (30 m) tall and have feather like fronds up to 35 feet (10 m) long. Coconuts, found on the coconut palm, are a delectable fruit available throughout the Yucatan. Once opened, the nuts contain a sweet drinkable nectar and pulpy fruit. Cooking oil and laundry soap can be produced from the nut.

The fronds of most palms are used for thatch roofs and the heart of young trees is considered a survival food. To get to the heart, cut down a tree (one that is about 10 years old) four feet from the ground. The best part is the section between the fronds and the cut level. Once the bark is cut away, the sweet meat from one tree will feed from 15 to 20 people.

*To open coconuts,* choose one that has a sloshing sound when shook. Then smash the outside green hide off with a machete to release the nut inside. Place the nut, eyes down, on the palm of your hand and, using a sharp rock or piece of coral, score the rim about an inch from the top. Tap the lid and it will fall off.

**Logwood** is a reddish-colored heartwood, most common in the Campeche region, that was once cut to near extinction for its red dye. The dye is still used in medical labs to stain tissue on slides. Both logwood bark and leaves are boiled to make a tea and drunk as an astringent for diarrhea.

**Oleander** is an ornamental plant seen throughout the Yucatán sitting in pots along boulevards, in driveways or along walkways. It is an evergreen shrub with aromatic pink or white blossoms that produce fruit with numerous downy seeds. However, its beauty is deceiving as it is one of the most poisonous plants in Mexico. The entire plant contains cardiac glycosides that, when used correctly, can be beneficial to the heart, but when chewed directly from the plant can cause death. The bark also contains a strychnine-like substance. These harmful chemicals do not disappear when the plant dies. Signs of ingestion are nausea, vomiting, excess salivation, diarrhea with blood, arrhythmia, drowsiness, tremors, seizures and, finally, coma. The sap also causes skin irritations and severe eye inflammation. Beautiful to look at but….

**Orchids** are considered one of the most highly evolved plants on the planet, but many are parasitic and grow on a host plant. However, there are some that are not parasitic and grow on their own. Depending on the source, the Yucatán is believed to have up to 300 of the 25,000 species known worldwide, with 80% of them living on host plants. Through evolution, orchids have developed thick leaves that retain moisture and many of the flowers are perfumed so they easily attract pollinating insects.

*Orchid*

The South and Central American Indians used vanilla obtained from an orchid as flavoring for drinks long before Columbus came to the continent. Its European name came from the Spanish word "vainilla," a diminutive form of "vaina," meaning sheath. This in turn came from the Latin word for "vagina."

*Dendrobium orchid*

Similar in appearance to the orchids are the **bromeliads**, or air plants. Endemic to the subtropics of the Americas, bromeliads will grow in any elevation up to 8,000 feet (3,000 m) and anywhere from the rain forest to the desert. Also like orchids, these plants gather nutrients and moisture through their leaves but their roots are only for anchoring, not for gathering food. Some bromeliads may be as small as one inch across while others grow to three feet. The pineapple is the most commonly known bromeliad.

**Pineapple** originated in Brazil and Paraguay, then was spread by the local Indians before Columbus arrived. He took the plant to Europe, where it was planted and taken to other countries.

This perennial bromeliad grows up to five feet (1½ m) and has long pointed leaves that can reach 72 inches (185 cm) in length. The edges of the leaves have sharp needles.

Normally, each plant produces only one fruit. To find if the fruit is ready to be eaten, snap your finger against it. If you hear a solid dull sound then it is good, but if the sound is hollow, the fruit is of poor quality and should be left.

Over the years, the pineapple has become a symbol of hospitality. Legend says that it got its reputation from a sea captain who was living in the

Caribbean. Whenever the captain returned from sea, he would stop at his friends' place and impale a fruit on the fence. This would be taken as an invitation for the friends to visit. The symbol was later incorporated by innkeepers who had the pineapple added to their logos and even carved onto their bed posts.

# Animal Life

In the Yucatán there are some 236 vertebrate species, 14 amphibians, 16 mammals, with seven being endemic and 13 threatened, 41 reptiles, with four endemic, and 165 species of birds, with four endemic and nine threatened.

Included in the endangered **bird** species are the yellow-lored parrot, the ocellated turkey, and the bat falcon. Also endangered are the Carey sea turtle, boa constrictor, Morelet's crocodile, the collared anteater, spider monkey, jaguarundi, ocelot, margay, jaguar, tayra, grison, paca and the agouti.

*Ocellated turkeys*

## Amphibians

Amphibians include frogs, toads, newts, salamanders, sirenians (sea cows), and caecilians (creatures that look like earthworms). Found worldwide except at the poles and in extreme deserts, amphibians have lungs but they also do some air exchange through their skin. Hatched from eggs, amphibians usually go through a tadpole or larvae stage where breathing is done through gills. They metamorphose into their final stage at which time they breath with lungs. Their skins are moist, glandular and pigmented, although, if they live away from light, pigmentation is minimal. Some, like the salamander, are able to rejuvenate lost body parts but, for some reason, the back end of the creature is quicker to regrow than the front limbs. The most endearing feature of the amphibian is its ability to consume large amounts of insects, with mosquitoes being a favorite.

# Reptiles

Reptiles are prominent in the Yucatán and you are bound to see at least one iguana, snake, turtle, gecko or toad while there. Reptiles control their temperature by moving around their environment. If it is too hot in the sun, they move to the shade. They all have a tough dry skin that is used primarily to preserve body moisture. Reptiles are the first creatures along the evolutionary ladder to have developed lungs. For protection some have developed hard shells or scales, while others have poisonous venom to inflict on enemies. Yet others change color so they blend into the environment.

Reptiles always live in vegetated areas (none live in the polar regions) and prefer warm climates. There are more reptiles living on land than in fresh water and more in fresh water than in salt water.

*The turtle's shell* makes his ribs immoveable so in order to breath turtles either swallow air or they kick their legs and pump the air into their lungs.

*Hawksbill turtle*

The **hawksbill turtle** is endangered due to the commercial value of its shell, meat and eggs. In recent years, this turtle's presence has drastically declined in the Caribbean and Atlantic Oceans. Unlike other turtles, the hawksbill has a beak-like mouth and two claws on each flipper. It generally grows to around 34 inches (87 cm) and 175 pounds (80 kg). However, the biggest ever found weighed in at 280 pounds (127 kg).

The hawksbill nests over a span of six months, between July and October. The female nests four or five times during this period, with a 14-day interval between each nesting. She lays around 140 eggs each time and the eggs hatch about 60 days later. At birth, each hatchling weighs less than an ounce (12-20 grams).

Generally hawksbills eat sponge from around coral reefs and they use the ledges of the reef for resting spots. Plastics and styrofoam have been found in the stomachs of these creatures, which means that increasing

pollution is also a factor in putting this amazing creature on the endangered list.

*Bekko* is a Japanese word meaning shell. Bekko has been used for making jewelry and decorating cabinets, doorposts, and mirrors. The orange, gold and dark brown scaled shell of the hawksbill is considered the most beautiful of them all.

**Loggerhead turtles** grow up to three feet (one m) and weigh as much as 250 pounds (115 kg). Named for their appearance, these turtles have large heads and short necks. Found in the coastal bays and estuaries of the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Oceans, they are known to travel from the coast of Canada down to the tip of Argentina. They are carnivores and like to eat shellfish; their powerful jaws crush the shells.

*Loggerhead*

The females nest every two or three years. Each season they nest four or five times and lay 100-125 eggs. The eggs incubate for a period of about 60 days. This period is dependent on climate temperatures, as is the sex of the turtle, which is affected during a critical period of .in the embryo's development. Females develop at higher temperatures, usually around 85°F/32°C while males form at temperatures around 75°F/26°C.

The **green turtle** is named for the color of its fat. It's a slow grower and does not reach sexual maturity for at least 20 years; some are believed to wait until they are 50. The green turtle grows to about 39 inches (100 cm) and can weigh 330 pounds (150 kg). However, in the recent past these creatures could grow to twice that size. This is a vegetarian turtle that grazes on the meadows of sea grass growing in warm ocean waters. Immature green turtles, however, will sometimes eat meat.

The females nest once every two to four years. Each nesting season results in two or three sessions, about 14 days apart. The female lays around 100 eggs each time and the youngsters hatch about 60 days later.

**Geckos** are tiny lizards that hang around tourists, clinging to the walls of their hotels, chirping a "gecko-gecko" sound and eating mosquitoes.

They have sticky toe pads for climbing and no eyelids, so you never see them blink. They come in various colors but most in the Yucatán are bright green. Their toe pads are divided into about 500,000 self-cleaning, hair-like bristles; each hair is double the diameter of a human hair. Be aware that it is very bad luck to harm a gecko.

**Tree frogs and toads** make sounds like a boat motor chugging. If you hear this, especially if you are away from a boating area, it could be a colony of toads. The giant ones grow to nine inches in length and weigh up to two pounds. If caught, these toads exude a milky substance called bufotoxin that is strong enough to kill a cat-sized animal. On human skin it causes severe burns. Tree frogs all have sticky round plates on their toes that give them the ability to walk up flat-surfaced walls.

**Snakes** are plentiful in the Yucatán. The venomous ones are the rattlesnakes, cantils, fer-de-lances and corals. There are 43 of the less harmful varieties and you might well see one in the jungle. The smallest snake is the tantillita canula that grows to just seven inches (18 cm). It's a harmless cutie that eats centipedes and hides under logs or old woodpiles.

If you are interested in snake species that you might see in the Yucatán, visit http://www.Yucatánwildlife.com/species/reptiles.htm#snakes.

*Fer-de-lance*

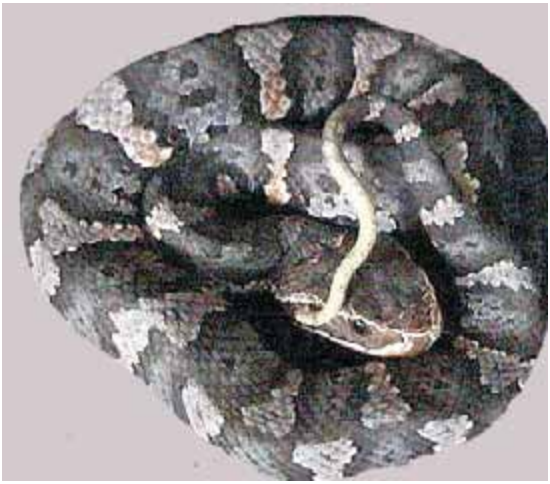
The **fer-de-lance** is responsible for most fatal snakebites in Central America. Aggressive and pervasive, it can be found in a tree, on the jungle floor, in the grass or out in the open. Its markings are not distinct so it is hard to identify. It has an arrow-shaped head holding two retractable fangs that appear to be too big for the snake's head. The fer-de-lance can be colored dark brown to gray to red and has a row of dark-edged diamonds along its sides. If attacked by one, get to a doctor immediately. Twenty-four hours is too long to wait and some people believe that you have only 20 minutes to receive treatment before you die.

**Coral snakes** are nocturnal but far less aggressive than the fer-de-lance. The coral's venom is highly toxic and every bit as dangerous as that of the fer-de-lance. Coral snakes are hard to spot since they hide in ground vege-

tation. Luckily, they prefer eating other snakes to sharpening their teeth on you. However, if you are bitten, get to a doctor immediately as they are extremely poisonous.

**Rattlesnakes** can grow to six feet (two m) and they like dry, rocky places. Their scales are white and brown and form diamonds along the back. Rodents and small birds make up most of their diet. Although the venom is poisonous, it's usually not life-threatening to humans. When in danger, the snake gives warning by rattling its tail, which has a series of hollow beads.

**Cantils** are brown to reddish, with a white or cream line across their faces and a yellow-green tail. Cantils are small, just 21-28 inches (55-70 cm) long. They like dry thorn forests and feed on small rodents, reptiles and fish. Females lay eight-20 eggs per session. This is a shy snake that will bite only when provoked. However, the poisonous bite must be treated by a doctor.



*Cantil*

## Mammals

*Bat*

**Bats** are the only mammals that fly. They range in size from a tiny three inches (seven cm) to one with a wingspan of six feet (two m). There are over 1,000 types of bats in the world and the Yucatán has 17 different species. The wing of the bat is like a webbed hand, with a thumb and four fingers. Also like a hand, the bat's wing can scoop up food, cradle its young or hug itself for warmth.

Bats like their own homes and often live their 30 years of life in the same cave, near the same hanging spot. All bats in a cave are related except for the one reproducing male, who always comes from another family and area. The females give birth to

one baby a year but infant mortality is as high as 60%. During the first year of life, mothers leave their babies only when hunting for food. When they return to the cave, they call and the youngsters recognize their mother's sound and answer. Following the sound, the mother then joins her youngster.

When feeding, bats can eat up to 3,000 insects in one sitting and up to 1,000 mosquitoes in an hour. I don't know who does the counting but if they are correct, I really like bats.

The **vampire bat** doesn't suck blood from the necks of beautiful women as was often portrayed in Hollywood movies. When it does bite, it exudes anti-coagulating saliva that keeps the blood flowing (rather than clotting) from the spot where the bat has bitten. It laps the blood with its tongue, taking as much as its body weight in sustenance during one feeding.

*Bacardi Rum* has, since 1862, had a fruit bat on its label. Some people believe the bat is good luck and claim it is the bat on the label, not the flavor of the alcohol, that has made Bacardi Rum the number one best-seller world wide.

*Jaguar*

**Jaguars** are the largest and most powerful cats in the Americas. Often referred to as *el tigre*, the jaguar stands around 20-30 inches (51-76 cm) at the shoulder and has an overall length of six to eight feet (two to three m). Its slender but strong body can weigh up to 250 pounds (115 kg).

A meat eater, the jaguar is built to hunt. He has strong shoulders, sharp teeth, good eyesight and hearing, and claws that can rip the hamstring of a deer with one good swipe.

The jaguar's short fur is usually yellow with black spots or black circles with a yellow dot in the center. Some jaguars, however,

appear to be entirely black; this is because their dots are so close together that the lighter color is almost invisible.

There is no specific breeding season for the jaguar; the kittens, when born, are cared for by both parents for about one year. Then everyone splits and fends for themselves. With good luck and lots of food, a jaguar is expected to live about 20 years.

Nocturnal, jaguars eat large animals like deer, peccaries and tapirs but they also like birds, monkeys, foxes, and turtles. They are great swimmers and can kill a sleeping alligator. They also love to fish. As for eating man, this is a myth. There are stories of jaguars following humans for miles through the jungle, but the conclusion is that the jaguar likes to escort man out of its territory rather than attack him.

Red tiger or **puma** is also called the mountain lion, cougar or panther. Just a bit smaller in size than the jaguar, this animal can be found throughout North and South America wherever deer, its main source of food, is found.

Comparable in strength to the jaguar, the puma is known to haul an animal five times its size for a considerable distance. When hunting, it strikes within a nanosecond and can spring forward 25 feet (7½ m) in one leap or descend 60 feet (18 m) in a single jump.

Like jaguars, pumas mate at any time of year and both parents help look after the young. However, the puma's life expectancy is only 15 years as compared to 20 for the jaguar.

**Margays** and **ocelots** are other cats, with the margay being the smaller of the two. An ocelot may weigh in at 35 pounds (16 kg) where the margay is not much bigger than a domestic cat. Both have black spots or rings and broken stripes on their fur. These cats hunt rabbits, rats, monkeys, birds, snakes and deer.

*Ocelot*

The **coati** is a tree-climbing mammal related to the raccoon. It has a long snout (tipped white) and an even longer tail that is usually the same length as its body. It keeps its striped tail high and swinging from

side-to-side when it walks. A full-grown male stands about 10 inches (25 cm) at the shoulder and will grow to two feet (half a meter) in length.

Sociable animals, coati females often travel with their young in groups of up to 20. When a group attacks a fruit tree, they can and often do devour the entire crop in a few minutes. This omnivore hunts during the day and at night and eats just about anything. It is common to see them moving along in tall grass or along rocky hillsides.

**Skunks** in America are often incorrectly referred to as polecats. However, a polecat is native only to Europe and Asia. Skunks on the other hand are found anywhere from northern Canada all the way down to Patagonia. Related to the weasel, this striped, furry critter can spray a horrid perfume up to a distance of 12 feet (3½ m). The skunk actually aims for the eyes of its enemy since its spray produces temporary blindness. Another night hunter, the skunk comes out of its den when temperatures cool. It then forages for insects, larvae, mice and fallen fruits.

Skunks mate in spring and have litters of up to five or six young that are ready to look after themselves within two months. Their life span is around 10 years.

*Peccary*

The **peccary** is a pig-like creature that has been around for about 40 million years (according to fossil finds). Not very big, it weighs about 65 pounds (23 kg) and travels in herds of a few individuals to as many as 300. The peccary has two distinct features. One is the smell it exudes from a musk gland on its back whenever it feels irritated. The second is its amazing nose, the tip of which is flat and reinforced with a cartilaginous disk that can lift logs and dig underground for roots and insects. A true omnivore, the peccary will eat anything from poisonous snakes to cactus. There is no fixed mating season and the female usually gives birth to one or two young about the size of a full-grown rabbit. By the time the young are two days old they are ready to take their place in the herd.

The ant bear or the **great anteater** is known for its lack of teeth. Instead of teeth, its elongated head has a small hole about the size of a pen from which a tongue that can extend up to 19 inches (48 cm) whips out and snatches up termites and other insects. Standing about two feet (60 cm) at

the shoulder, it is (including tail) some 6½ feet (two m) long. Its front toes and claws curl under so it appears to be walking on its knuckles.

Females give birth to one baby that stays with her for an entire year and is often seen riding on its mother's back. The anteater is inoffensive and usually runs (and swims) away from perceived danger.

The **armadillo**, also known as the dilly, is an insect-eating mammal that has a bony-plated shell encasing its back. This shell is the animal's protection. Although of the same family as the ant bear, the armadillo has teeth that are simple, rootless pegs in the back of its mouth. Because of these teeth, the armadillo is able to eat snakes, chickens, fruit and eggs. It also likes to munch on the occasional scorpion. Females give birth to a litter of young that are all the same sex; one theory is that they develop from the same egg. The young are born with shells but the shells don't harden until the end of the first year. This is also when it leaves its mother.

The Maya believe that the black-headed vulture, rather than dying, becomes an armadillo when it gets old.

**Tapirs** or mountain cows are related to the horse and rhinoceros but they are unique in that they are the last surviving ungulates with an odd number of toes and that bear their weight on the middle toe. Named from the Brazilian Indian word meaning "thick," the name refers to their thick hide. This shorthaired animal stands about four feet (1.2 m) at the shoulder and weighs in at around 600 pounds (275 kg) when fully grown. It has a trunk-like snout that grabs leaves from aquatic plants or forest foliage for food. An excellent swimmer, the tapir can stay underwater for long periods of time, especially when hiding from its worst enemies, the jaguar and puma.

The **spider monkey** is not as common as the howler nor is it as noisy. Spider monkeys have grasping hands but no functional thumbs and a grasping tail that is hairless at the end. These five "hands" make the spider efficient in maneuverability. They travel in bands of 20 to 30 and, like humans, will attack threatening invaders. The spiders' weapons are fruits and branches and some are known to urinate on enemies walking below. There are signs in Costa Rica warning tourists of this pos-

*Spider monkey baby*

sibility and similar signs are now beginning to appear in the jungles of Mexico.

*Black howler monkey*

**Baboons** or **black howler monkeys** make a horrid howling, growling sound that, if heard when walking alone through the jungle, will spook the hell out of you. And that is what it is meant to do. From a distance it sounds like a jet plane taking off. From up close, it's like a bunch of lions scrapping over a zebra. This leaf-eating primate has little facial hair except on its chin. Like the spider, the howler has a long grasping tail. Its skin is black and its jawbone protrudes to accommodate the bladder-like resonating chamber found in its throat. This chamber is what allows the monkey to make the frightening racket it does.

Howlers live in troops of no more than 10 and have one dominant male leader. Once a troop is formed, they eat, sleep and travel together. Howlers weigh up to 25 pounds (11 kg) and mothers nurse their young for about 18 months.

Some believe howlers make noise only at dawn and dusk while others believe they howl when there is impending rain or danger. I think they howl because they like to. If I could make all that noise with little effort I'd sure do so, especially if I could scare a "troop" of gringos!

**RECOMMENDED GUIDES**

*Animals and Plants of the Ancient Maya*, Victoria Schlesinger, University of Texas Press, 2002.

*Field Guide to the Mammals of Central America and Southeast Mexico*, Fiona Reid, Oxford University Press, USA, 1998.

*Southern Mexico, Traveler's Wildlife Guide*, Les Beletsky, Interlink, 2006. This book includes birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians and reef fish.

## Insects

In the Yucatán there are mosquitoes, flies, army ants, tarantulas, leaf cutter ants, and scorpions but the most famous of the insects is the **monarch butterfly** that each December, migrates here from the north. They often

appear as a black cloud of locusts and, when they land to feed, clean a field of vegetation within two minutes.

**Scorpions** should be avoided as they do bite; shake out shoes and clothes before putting them on. Apparently the smaller the scorpion, the more lethal the bite. There are two species in the Yucatán. One is black, with a bite no worse than a wasp sting. The other, cream in color (called the *escorpione*) is smaller, with a more lethal bite.

**Tarantulas** can be found but those seen are usually large males hunting for females. They are so intent on finding their mates, who usually hide in burrows, that their life span is decreased to less than two years, while a female lives up to 30. The males are about four to six inches across with hairy legs and when they find their females, they gently subdue them with caresses. After copulation, males retreat before their mate kills them, a common practice with females. If threatened, a tarantula will bristle. Don't touch. Contact with the hairs causes severe skin irritation.

For the most part, **ants** work in the service industry, cleaning up a lot of garbage left around the jungle floors (and your room if you are careless). Highly organized, their colonies can be many yards across and equally as high.

A colony of **leaf cutter ants** (also called wee wee ants) can strip a full-grown mahogany tree within a day. The ants chew and swallow the leaves, which they regurgitate. Fungus grows on the vomit. The ants in turn eat the fungus. After digestion, the excretion helps fertilize jungle floors. A leaf cutter ants' colony consists of females only and the queen is the size of a small mouse. Her job is to lay eggs, while her workers clean and feed her. No matter where you walk in the jungle, you will probably see a trail made by leaf cutter ants.

**Termites** live in those huge blobs of gunk that cling to trees or stand freely up to 10 feet (three m). They live on dead plant material, animal dung, wood and soil. Social insects, they live in colonies sometimes growing to several million individuals. They live in a caste system, with the reproducing queen and king at the head. Then there are workers and, finally, soldiers, equipped with a coat of armor used for protection against invading ants.

## Birds

In the Yucatán, there are 546 bird species from 74 families (some sources say 509 species from 62 families). Some 128 species from North America winter here and 58 vagrants or occasional visitors pass through. There are an inordinate number of endemic species, about 100 in all.

The best places for birding include **Calakmul Biosphere** with 350 species, including the threatened curassow. **Sian Ka'an** has 345 species, **Ria Celestún Biosphere** has up to 10,000 flamingos, **Ria Lagartos** has 72

*Yucatán woodpecker (A. Celis)*

migratory and 141 resident species and **El Eden**, just two hours north of Cancún, has so many species the area is often used for bird studies.

There is an annual **bird festival** at the end of November held in different parts of the Yucatán. In 2007 it was in Mérida and Izamel. The festival has a main search for experienced birders and also a beginner's event. For information visit www.Yucatánbirds.org.mx/ingles/eventos/toh.php.

For a complete bird list of the Yucatán, visit www.Yucatánbirds.org.mx/pdf/Yucatán.pdf. The legend is found at the end of the 12 page list, which was compiled by birder, Barbara McKinnon.

**RECOMMENDED GUIDES**

*A Field Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Central America* by L.I. Davis, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1972.

*A Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Northern Central America* by S.N.G. Howell and S. Webb, Oxford University Press, New York, 1995.

*A Field Guide to Mexican Birds* by R. T. Peterson and E. Chalif, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1973.

# Underwater Life

## Corals

**Stony corals** such as the brain coral and the star coral are the main builders of reefs and atolls and are found exclusively in warm waters at a depth above 80 feet (25 m). Stony corals are arranged in multiples of six polyps to each tentacle.

The **horny corals**, with eight polyps to each tentacle, include species such as sea fans and elk horn corals. These corals have a supporting spine and some have over a million polyps. There are thousands of species of horny corals and just being able to identify the stony from the horny is a good start to your underwater life.

**Soft coral** does not deposit or contribute to the construction of a barrier reef since they totally disintegrate after death. There are also false corals such as the prized and threatened "black coral," used for making ebony-colored jewelry.

Within the coral reef are underwater plants and grasses, some that flower and all with roots. Some have thick leaves while others seem to be threads. Amid them all are barnacles and conch, crabs and lobster, and fish of every color, size and shape.

## Sea Animals

Sea creatures have exotic habits and mating patterns. For example **lobsters**, usually nocturnal, live under rocks, with males on one side and females on the other. There are seldom more than five per rock. When the female is ready to mate (and molt) she visits the dominant male, fans her tail and, when he fans his tail, she moves in. The male does a lot of claw tapping and tail fanning, probably to see how far along she is before she casts her clothes (her shell). Once she's ready, she works herself up to a frenzy of tapping and fanning, then falls over and starts crawling out of her shell. Once she flops out (she's unable to support herself without her skeleton) the male pushes her onto her back and they copulate. She instantly starts to develop a second shell while he enjoys her edible castoffs. A day or so later, she leaves.

*Manatees*

The **manatee** or sea cow is a favorite attraction for tourists. This gentle aquatic animal weights about 400 pounds (180 kg) and is around seven feet (2.1 m) long, although some large males have been known to grow up to 1,500 pounds (680 kg) and reach 15 feet (4½ m) in length. They have a torpedo-like body with a long flat tail that is used for propulsion. Its two forepaws are like paddles with tiny claws on the ends. Its upper lip is cleft and dotted with a few whiskers.

An interesting feature of the manatee's teeth is that the 11 growing on the bottom jaw rotate. As the front two wear out, they drop off and the entire

row moves forward. In the space where the last molars in the back were located, a new set develops.

The manatee is a bottom-feeder eating up to 100 pounds (45 kg) of seaweed and grasses a day. Females give birth to one infant, underwater, per season. Directly after birth the mother takes its young up to the surface to breath. After that, both parents take equal responsibility for the raising of their young.

Now protected, the manatee was, for centuries, hunted as food. Apparently its meat is deep red and quite rich. Christians used to consider this a fish, so it was eaten on Fridays and during Lent. We now know it is not a fish but a mammal.

**Dolphins** are playful and intelligent creatures that are plentiful in the Caribbean. They mature between five and 12 years and a female gives birth to one calf every two or three years. The life span of a dolphin is as much as 48 years. Dolphins travel in pods and it is suspected that each member of a pod is related. They like to stay near their home waters for their entire lifespan. Using the echo location method for hunting, similar to what bats use, dolphins eat up to 150 pounds (68 kg) of fish a day.

## Fish

**Groupers** are one of the most common fish you will see around the reefs. They have heavy bodies usually about three feet (one m) long, with large heads and blubbery lips. Groupers are generally brown in color with lighter vertical stripes. They are carnivores.

**Angelfish** abound; there are 74 species of angelfish and most of them get 95% of their food from sponges. They have developed teeth that are able to secrete mucus around the sponge that in turn allows the fish to ingest the sponge itself. Some species of angelfish mate for life while others may change their sex and become males if there aren't enough reproducing studs around.

**Whale sharks** can be seen during the snapper moon – the full moons of March, April and May. At that time snappers and groupers are spawning and the whale sharks like the taste of those newly fertilized eggs. A whale shark is the largest fish known. It may grow to 50 feet (15 m) and weigh 18 metric tons. That is a lot of animal. Because the whale shark swims with its mouth wide open in an attempt to trap plankton, its mouth obstructs its view and so it has developed sensory cells along its sides that indicate not only other objects but the cells identify at what depth the whale is swimming.

# National Emblems

The unofficial Yucatán state flag was designed by Juan Manuel Gabino Villascan and was adopted in 2001. The coat of arms was designed by the same artist.

# Travel Information

**Language:** Spanish is the official language, although most people working in the service industry can speak workable English far better than most of us can speak Spanish. In the more remote areas, if you wish to communicate beyond the purchase of a room, beer or burger, it's advisable to learn some Spanish.

**Currency:** Mexican Peso; US$1 = 10.9 pesos, Cdn $1 = 10.9 pesos.

**Hospitals:** There is medical care in Mexico equal to that of Europe or the rest of North America. Most doctors speak a little English and many were educated at North American schools. To purchase medical insurance in Mexico, you must be under 65 years of age. Pharmacies charge about half of what you will pay in Canada or the US for prescriptions. Medical tourism is growing rapidly.

**Religion:** For all of Mexico, Roman Catholics are 76%, Protestants 6.3%.

**Education:** There are 45 university-level institutions in Mérida out of 65 in the Yucatán as a whole. Mérida has three graduate schools. In the Yucatán, 8,000 students graduated from university-level institutions during 2006. Almost 12% of the population has a university education and literacy rate is 92% for males and 90% for females.

**Life expectancy** in Mexico in 2005 was 77 years for females and 72 for males, up from 61 for males in 1970. The urban growth rate is 1.9%. Marriages under 18 years of age are at 21%, down 10% in the last 10 years, and the number of live births per 1,000 women of reproductive age is 2.3%, down from 6.8% in 1970.

**Income per capita** in the country is $10,030. Five percent of the population has an income of less than $1 per day.

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**Military:** Men and women may enter the military in Mexico at the age of 18 and the forces consist of an Army, Navy and Air Force. There are presently almost 200,000 active persons in the military working under an annual budget of $4 billion. There are also 300,000 on reserve. It is compulsory for men at age 18 to enlist and those 16 years of age may volunteer as technician trainees. Women may volunteer at age 18. Conscientious objectors are not exempt from service. Which sector of the military one serves in is determined by a game of chance. Those who draw a white ball from the bag go into the Army or Air Force while those who get a blue ball must enter the Navy. Mexico offers those in the service an opportunity for secondary education or special training in fields such as social work.

| YUCATÁN | |
|---|---|
| Head of state | Ivonne Ortega Pacheco, elected 2007 |
| Capital | Mérida |
| Population | 1,803,000 |
| Land area | 15,189 square miles or 39,339 sq km |
| **QUINTANA ROO** | |
| Head of state | Felix Gonzalez Canto, elected 2005 |
| Capital | Chetumal |
| Population | 1,134,000 |
| Land area | 19,440 square miles or 42,535 sq km |
| **CAMPECHE** | |
| Head of state | Jorge Carlos Hurtado Valdez, elected 2003 |
| Capital | Campeche |
| Population | 751,000 |
| Land area | 22,288 square miles or 57,727 sq k |

# National Holidays

The listed holidays are celebrated throughout the Yucatán and some throughout the country. Each town has local festivities that are listed in this book under the name of each town.

## January

**1 - New Year's Eve/Day** is celebrated by each person, at midnight, eating 12 grapes. With each grape, they make a wish for the New Year. Special breads are cooked with coins inside. The bread is cut at midnight and whoever gets the piece with the coin has good luck all year.

**2-6 - Fair of the Three Kings** is in honor of the gifts brought during Christ's birth. Celebrated mainly in the Yucatán, festivities include the tra-

ditional Yucatán dance, the Jaranas. For those celebrating older traditions, Christmas gifts are opened on the 6th but some have changed to the new calendar and open gifts on December 25th, as in the rest of North America. Common for all, sweet bread decorated with colorful candied fruits, is served.

**17 - Feast of San Antonio de Abad** is a Catholic celebration when animals are blessed inside the church by a priest. The animals are usually decorated with flowers and ribbons, and fed special treats.

## February

**5 - National Constitution Day** commemorates the signing of the 1917 constitution. If the day falls on Tuesday or Thursday, all school children have a long weekend.

**24 - National Flag Day** is the day the state received independence.

**Carnival** is an official five-day celebration before the beginning of Lent when Catholics give up something pleasurable for 40 days. This day changes yearly, starting on Ash Wednesday and ending on Easter. Carnival, or Mardi Gras in some countries, is believed to be of pagan origin and features parades, colorful costumes and street dancing. A vast amount of alcohol is also consumed.

## March

**21 - President Benito Juárez's Birthday**. Juárez is given credit for separating state and church in politics. This is also the **Spring Equinox** where celebrations are held at many Maya ruins. The third Monday of March is an official holiday regardless of when Juárez's birthday falls.

**Semana Santa - Easter**, Mexico's holiest day. Locals recreate the crucifixion in the streets, although they stop before they sacrifice a young Mexican. Hotel bookings should be made in advance during this week as Mexicans also take holidays at this time.

## May

**1 - Labor Day** is celebrated throughout the country with parades and feasting. All government offices are closed.

**5 - Cinco de Mayo** is a national holiday honoring the defeat of the French army at the Battle of Puebla in 1862. After battles over independence in 1810, the American Mexican War and the Civil War of 1858, the success of the 1862 battle gave spirit back to the people.

**10 - Mother's Day** is celebrated on this day rather than a flexible day to coincide with a weekend. Mothers throughout the country are taken to a restaurant for an honorary dinner.

## June

**1 - Navy Day** when coastal towns celebrate with boat parades and fireworks. Mérida has recently made this the time of their annual **Bird Festival**, a popular and growing event.

## September

**State of the Union** is when the president delivers a speech to the nation. This event occurs on the first Sunday in September.

**16 - Independence Day** is the day the revolution started in 1810 rather than the day Mexico earned its independence from Spain. Independence was recognized on September 27, 1821. The celebrations include joining others in shouting, "Viva Mexico" in the town plaza at midnight.

## October

**12 - Columbus Day** is when Columbus landed in the Americas. Called *Dia de la Raza* (day of the race), the event celebrates the joining of the Mexican and Spanish races.

## November

**1-2 - Day of the Dead** coincides with **All Saints Day**, when families decorate the altars at their homes and the gravesites of respected relatives. They use the deceased's favorite foods, drink, cigarettes and chocolate as decorative items. A common dish served to guests and relatives is the *mucbil pollo*, a chicken-tamale baked in a pit oven. All preparations start on October 31.

**20 - Revolution Day** is the day when the 1910 war to overthrow dictator Porfirio Diaz began. It is a national holiday celebrated by parades and feasting. The parades include athletic performances such as human pyramids and jumping through a ring of fire.

## December

**12 - Day of Our Virgin of Guadalupe**, the patron saint of Mexico. The Virgin appeared in 1531 to an Indian in the village of Tepeyac, north of Mexico City. She left an image of herself on a *tilma*, a poor quality cloth. To this day the image has shown no signs of deterioration.

**16 - Las Posadas** celebrates Mary and Joseph looking for shelter in Bethlehem. It is also the start of the Christmas celebrations that continue until January 6th and include parties and candlelight processions. Breaking a piñata is part of the fun.

**24-25 - Christmas** celebrations begin with midnight mass and end with a huge feast that includes turkey, ham or suckling pig, along with traditional dishes such as *romeritos*, a vegetable dish done with mole sauce, spinach tamales, and date-pecan pie. Christmas itself is a day of rest.

**28 - Santos Inocentes** or All Fool's Day celebrates the killing of all male children in King Herod's time. This day is the same as April Fool's Day in the US and Canada when everyone tries to play jokes on friends and family. Here, they try to borrow cash or something valuable. If successful, the borrower gets to keep the swag.

| MAYA GODS | |
|---|---|
| Haac | Rain God |
| Ehecatl | Wind God |
| Itzamna | God of corn, writing and reading |
| Ixchel | Goddess of water, weaving and childbirth |
| Kinich Ahau | Sun God |
| Kukulkan | Quetzalcoatl's name in the Yucatán |
| Ometeotl | God of heaven, earth and the underworld |
| Quetzalcoatle | Taught the Maya how to grow and prepare cacao |



# What to Take

## Required Documents

Since January 1, 2007, all visitors, including Americans and Canadians, require a **passport**. Changing planes in the US requires a valid passport by all non-American travelers.

Children under 18 who are citizens of Canada or the United States must also have a passport. Children not traveling with both legal guardians must have a notarized letter of consent from the non-traveling parent with permission for the child to cross international borders. I have never been asked for this notarized letter anywhere in the world, although I have always carried one when taking children who were not my own.

A Mexican child, born abroad, who is too young to have received his birth certificate, must have a notarized letter from the pediatrician or hospital identifying the child as belonging to the adult.

Mexicans residing in the US may travel one way with a Mexican passport (even if it is expired) or with a Matricula Consular, a Certificate of Nationality issued by the Mexican Consulate, plus a photo identification card or birth certificate, a Mexican voter registration paper plus a photo identification card. An American Green Card will not get Mexican citizens back into Mexico but the card will get them into the US from Mexico.

Once in Mexico, if staying more than 72 hours and traveling beyond the border zones such as Tijuana or Progreso in the Yucatán, you will receive a **tourist card**. Do not lose this card as it will take a lot of complicated bureaucracy and a bit of money to get another. There is no charge for a tourist card when it is first issued.

Citizens of the following countries do not require a visa to enter Mexico for tourist purposes but they must have a valid passport: Andorra, Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bermuda, Brazil, Costa Rica,

Chile, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Finland, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Iceland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Monaco, Norway, New Zealand, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, San Marino, Singapore, Slovenia, South Korea, Spain, South Africa, Switzerland, Uruguay, Venezuela, Sweden.

Residents of some countries must apply for a **visa** to the Mexican consulate or embassy in their own countries before they arrive at the Mexican border or immigration authorities in Mexico City. It takes six to eight weeks to process this type of visa and only those applying for a visa may enter the Mexican consulate or embassy in their country. The cost is up to $37 depending on which country of origin, and must be paid in cash or money order. The countries to which these rules apply are: Afghanistan, Albania, Angola, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Belarus, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Cambodia, Congo, Croatia, Estonia, Georgia, Haiti India, Iraq\, Iran, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lebanon, Libya, Lithuania, Macedonia, Mauritania, Moldavia, Mongolia, Morocco, Niger, North Korea, Oman, Pakistan, Palestine, Qatar, Russia, Sahara Dem. Rep., Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Turkmenistan, Turkey, Ukraine, United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, Yemen and Yugoslavia.

The residents of the following countries must apply for a visa to visit Mexico but they need not pay the $37 consular fee necessary for the countries above: Bolivia, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Nicaragua, Peru, Ecuador, Rumania, Belize, Panama, Guatemala, Malaysia.

Those wanting to retire or reside in Mexico must have a special visa. For this one-year, multiple-entry visa you must have a valid passport, completed application form, photos, health certificate, letter from your local police department stating that you have no police record, confirmation from a bank that your monthly income exceeds $2,000 plus $1,000 for each dependant. And finally, you must pay the consular fee of $136 in cash or money order. This type of visa takes three days to process and can be extended on a yearly basis for a period of five years, after which permanent residence status must be obtained. If you make money in Mexico, you are subject to Mexican taxes and eligible for social security.

For more information, contact the **Mexican Ministry of the Interior**, National Institute of Migration, Ejercito Nactional #862, Col. Los Morales/Seccion Palmas, Mexico, DF, 11540. Their website, at time of writing was out of commission.

Canadian and American journalists traveling in Mexico for a special event (or to write a book like this) must get an FM-3 migratory form from the nearest consular office in their country. This document allows the journalist to enter Mexico numerous times for a period of 90 days.

Working in Mexico requires a special visa. Workers may fill positions in the country that cannot be filled first by Mexicans. Companies big enough to require a foreign president, treasurer, general manager and so on must comply with the 90%-Mexican-employee-to-10%-foreign-employee ratio. Professionals such as doctors, lawyers and engineers may receive immigrant status if they have their degrees and a special license to practice in Mexico. Investors must have 26,000 times the current daily minimum wage ($4.58 pesos/hr) to invest in Mexico before opening a company. This money, US$12,000, must be in the Mexican Development Bank guaranteeing that investment will be made within a specific time period that is determined by the National Institute of Migration.

A good website for information about travel in Mexico including driving tips and offbeat destinations is Mexico Mike's at **www.mexicomike.com**. He's been collecting information about Mexico since the 1960s.

## Traveling with Pets

Pets must have a veterinarian's certificate, issued within the last seven days, stating that the animal is free of communicable diseases. A rabies vaccination certificate is also required, showing that the pet was vaccinated at least one month and less than one year before crossing the border. It is advisable to have pet travel insurance. Taking any exotic or endangered pet such as a macaw into Mexico is not permitted and the animal could be confiscated at the border.

Returning to the US with a traveling pet requires a vet's certificate saying the pet had a rabies shot within the preceding three years.

## Packing List

There is nothing special you are likely to need except for medical prescriptions that you cannot purchase in Mexico. However, if you wish to save your money for tequila and tours, the following list suggests possible items needed.

**Binoculars** are a must for bird-watchers. There are an abundance of exotic and migratory birds that are well worth scouting out. Binoculars are also fun on the beach to watch boats sailing past and to watch those on the boats.

A **Spanish-English dictionary** is necessary if visiting small villages. There is a basic language program, published by McGraw Hill (*iSpeak Spanish*) that can be downloaded to your hand-held computer system, along with a book you might want to bring for reading, along with this guidebook.

**Shorts** and **t-shirts** or skirt/**pants**. Everyone wears shorts. Keep your clothing loose and comfortable – the heat determines the attire. Revealing

outfits are not acceptable in small villages. At the resorts, you may be shocked by the dress of some fellow tourists.

If going during rainy season, take **rain protection**. Sandals are good at the beach but running or hiking shoes are recommended for jungle walks and playing golf — remember the fer-de-lance. Shoes with good support are best if touring the museums and galleries.

One **bathing suit** is good but two would be better. A beach towel or grass mat is good for lying on the sand. Mats can be purchased at shops along the beaches.

**Cameras** are great to record memories. Bring a familiar one so mistakes aren't made on critical images. Humidity is high so keeping the camera dry should be a priority, especially if it is an electronic one. I use a foam-padded carrying bag. Putting cameras in plastic bags is not advisable as the moisture seems to condense.

Film is readily available in Mexico for the same price as in the US and Canada. Because of the intense sunlight, a slow-speed film is recommended (ASA 50 to 100). A flash used during the day helps eliminate harsh shadows. Batteries are also readily available.

If interested in underwater photography, I suggest you take an introductory course before leaving home. One lady I spoke with threw out the first 100 images she took because they were so bad. The second hundred were even worse.

Using video or still cameras at some archeological sites costs an extra $4 per day. The use of a tripod at these sites requires a special permit from the INAH.

**Money belts** are useful but not as much as they used to be. ATMs are in every hamlet in the country so carrying large amounts of money is no longer a problem. Most upper-end hotels have safes for valuables such as passports and credit/debit cards. Always distribute your credit cards in different places, so if you are robbed you won't lose everything.

**Daypacks** are far more convenient than handbags or beach bags. They are also harder to pickpocket or snatch. In cities, on buses or crowded places like markets, wear your daypack at the front, with the waist strap done up. That way, your hands can rest on the bag while you walk. In this position, it is almost impossible for pickpockets to access the pack. Also you can keep your camera accessible but out of site in the pack. Keep only the amount of money you need for a day or two and your credit/debit cards in a safer spot such as the hotel safe.

It seems to me that a map is useless without a **compass**. They are lightweight and you need not buy one with triangulation measurements. A simple one will do.

**Diving gear**, such as wet suits and facemasks, can be brought or rented. A PADI diving certification ticket must be carried. The tour operators check

this certificate before you go out. You should also check their qualifications before heading into the depths.

Snorkeling gear (mask and flippers) can be brought from home or rented in Mexico. If going to only one resort, bringing gear is not a problem but, if traveling around, you may find it easier to rent. You can also purchase a set, use it for the time you are there and donate it to some kid who'd appreciate it.

**Surf boards** can be checked in as a piece of luggage on most airlines. Dedicated surfers should bring their boards but those less committed can get away with renting.

**Camping equipment** should be brought if you are sleeping in campgrounds. Sleeping on secluded beaches is not recommended. A tent with mosquito netting, sleeping pad and a light cover are needed. Because of fuel availability, gasoline rather than white gas cooking stoves should be brought.

An **umbrella** is good if you plan on lots of walking. It keeps off the sun and rain. These can be purchased in Mexico for about the same price or a little less than inexpensive ones at home.

A **first aid kit** should include mole-skin, Advil, tenser bandage (for sprained wrists or ankles), antihistamines, topical antibiotic cream and Band-Aids. All prescription medications and items such as batteries for hearing aids or extra eyeglasses should be carried. If you are active, a band that goes around your head to keep glasses from falling off is a good idea.

**Maps** are essential and among the best are those published by International Travel Maps and Books, 530 West Broadway, Vancouver, BC, ☎ 604-879-3621, www.itmb.com. Most sell for less than $12.95 or less. There is an excellent publication by Dist. De Ediciones Indepencia, available in Mexico that includes good maps for the major cities of the Yucatán, plus one showing the major roads and another indicating the location of the ruins. It is called *Yucatán*.

**Photocopy of passport** and any other documents. You can scan your passport and e-mail the scan to your traveling e-mail address. This way, you always have a copy.

**Reading material** is available in English at the magazine stands or bookstores and many hotels have book-trading services. But, for the most part, you need to bring the really good books with you. Leaving them behind when you return home is a good idea.

**Sunglasses** and **sun hat** should be brought or bought and worn at all times because the intense ultraviolet light can damage your eyes and burn your face.

**Sunscreen** is necessary. Do not risk skin cancer because you don't like chemicals. If spending time in the jungle, use **insect repellent** too.

# Health

Mexico now has the same quality medical services as the rest of North America and Europe, but it is advisable to have medical insurance. Also remember that anyone over 65 can not purchase health insurance in Mexico; proof of insurance must be brought from home.

In the event of a serious illness or accident, you will want to get home quickly. Without insurance, the cost could be prohibitive. Make certain your insurance includes evacuation expenses.

Bring with you anything you may need in the way of prescriptions, glasses, orthopedics, dental equipment and batteries for hearing aids.

## Medical Insurance

Good insurance includes emergency evacuation, repatriation, emergency reunion, trip interruption, lost baggage, accidental death and trip cancellation.

I have worked with Patricia Romero Hamrick from International Insurance-Seguros, 1047 W. Madero Mesa, AZ 85210-7635, ☎ 480-345-0191, patty@seguros-insurance.net, www.seguros-insurance.net. I found her helpful and quick to answer questions. She also works through Global Travel Insurance, ☎ 800-232-9415, www.globalmedicalplans.com. The best thing about this company's insurance is that they cover emergency evacuation and reunion (bringing next of kin to you). They also carry a Hazardous Sports rider for those off-road mountain biking or rock climbing events.

## Staying Healthy

General health should be kept at the optimum level when traveling. Make sure you rest, drink lots of clean water, and eat a well balanced diet supplemented with vitamins.

Salt intake is important in the heat to help prevent dehydration. Carry some powdered electrolytes to use in the event of dehydration.

Should you suffer from diarrhea, rest, drink plenty of mineral water and consume no alcohol. This common condition, often caused by the change in diet, usually clears up quickly. Mineral water can be supplemented with yogurt tablets.

Failing this, try Imodium, especially if you are going home soon. This tiny pill is extremely effective. However, when used for some stomach problems, Imodium can contribute to severe scarring on the intestine.

## Fevers & Worse

According to the World Health Organization, **malaria** exists year-round in rural areas of Quintana Roo and Campeche. For the most part, visitors to the Yucatán suffer no danger of infection.

Keep exposed skin covered early in the morning or at dusk when in the jungles, especially during the rainy season. Using insect repellent laced with DEET is also recommended. Use a sleeping net in infected areas.

**Dengue fever** and **dengue hemorrhagic fever** are present in some villages of Quintana Roo. The fever is caused by four related, but distinctly different, viruses, which are spread by daytime-biting mosquitoes. Infection from one of the viruses does not produce immunity to the other three. Dengue cannot be transmitted from person to person.

Symptoms of dengue are high fever, headache, backache, joint pain, nausea, vomiting, eye pain and rash. There is no treatment except to take painkillers containing acetaminophen, rather than ASA (acetylsalicylic acid), which decreases the blood's clotting abilities thus increasing the possibility of hemorrhage. Drink plenty of fluids and rest. If dengue hemorrhagic fever is contracted, fluid replacement therapy may be necessary. The illness lasts about 10 days and total recovery takes two to four weeks.

Dengue is now on the rise. In the 1960s the WHO said there were about 30,000 cases worldwide. By 1995 this increased to 592,000 cases, with 240,000 being in Mexico. Today, with the increase in urbanization and decrease in eradication programs, WHO believes there are 20 million cases worldwide. This means that mosquito bites are increasingly risky when in the tropics. Those staying along the beaches in resorts have almost no danger of contracting the virus.

**Yellow fever** is present in all the jungles of Central America. Though inoculation is not required for entrance to Mexico, it may be required for re-entry to your own country. Check with your doctor. Inoculation is good for 10 years. Children must also have a certificate of inoculation but it is not recommended to inoculate those less than one year of age.

Routine inoculations common in your home country should be up to date. Besides these, immune globulin, good for six months, is recommended against **viral hepatitis**. Inoculation against **typhoid fever** is highly recommended. This inoculation is good for 10 years.

## Bugs

**Worms** and **parasites** can be a problem anywhere in the tropics. To name and describe them all would be impossible. Keep your feet free of cuts or open sores so that worm eggs or parasites cannot enter. Use sandals in the showers if cleanliness is in question (not a problem in the resorts). Wear closed shoes such as runners when in the jungle.

Use treated water. Eat at places where locals eat. If they remain healthy, you should too. An empty restaurant usually means a bad stomach.

The **bot fly** and the **new world screw worm** are insects found in the jungles that cause a boil-like sore after the larvae (maggot) has started to grow in its host (you). Bot flies transport their eggs by way of mosquitoes and the screw worm in the fly stage drops its eggs near an open sore or on mucus membranes. Once the egg is in its host, it hatches and lives under the skin. However, the fly must have air. If you have a red, puss-filled swelling that is larger than a mosquito bite, look closely. If there is a small hole in the swollen area, cover it with petroleum jelly to prevent the fly from breathing. Without air, it dies. It takes four to eight days for the bot fly larvae to hatch and five to 12 weeks for the screwworm .to hatch

**Chagas**, also known as the kissing bug, exists in Latin America and infection can become either chronic or acute. The parasite enters the blood stream when the infected oval-shaped insect inserts its proboscis into your skin. As it sucks blood, its excretion is forced out and into the opening it has formed in your body. It is the excretion that carries the larvae of the parasite.

Once planted the larvae migrate to the heart, brain, liver and spleen where they nest and form cysts. If, one morning after sleeping under a thatched roof, you find a purplish lump somewhere on exposed skin, you may have been bitten. If fever, shortness of breath, vomiting or convulsions occur, see a doctor immediately. Mention your suspicions.

## Jelly Fish Stings

These are a possibility for anyone who enters the water. There are often flags along the beach indicating the presence of jellyfish. Some stings can leave a welt for weeks but most last only a few hours. A jellyfish has nematocysts attached to its tentacles that touch your skin and release a toxin. This is what burns. There is an anti-sting available in the United States called After Sting Gel. It sells for about $4 plus shipping if ordering on the Web. It can also be used for bee stings. If you do get stung, douse the spot with vinegar and use ice to relieve the pain.

For official government updates on outbreaks, advisories and more, visit the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention run by the US Health Department at www.cdc.gov.

## Treatment Options

If you become sick, contact your own consulate for the names of doctors or medical clinics. The consulates can usually recommend doctors who have been trained in your place of origin.

Another alternative is to contact the International Association for Medical Assistance to Travelers (IAMAT) clinics. The doctors speak English or French and Spanish (in Mexico) and charge between $55 for office visits to $95 for emergency visits at night or on Sundays.

The information reported in this section is taken from either the IAMAT's or the World Health Organization's publications. If you so feel inclined, please become a member of IAMAT and send a donation to International Association for Medical Assistance to Travelers, 417 Center Street, Lewiston, NY, USA, 14092, ☎ 716-754-4883, or 40 Regal Road, Guelph, Ontario, Canada, N1H 7L5, ☎ 519-836-0102, www.iamat.org. Their services are invaluable. Some of the money they raise goes toward a scholarship program that assists doctors in developing countries to receive training in developed countries. They also sell at cost a portable mosquito net that weighs about five lbs/two kilos.

### IAMAT

IAMAT was started when Vincenzo Marcolongo, a graduate of medicine from McGill University, was working in Rome in 1960 and saw an ill Canadian who had previously seen a local doctor. The Canadian had been given a drug that was banned in North America because it destroyed white blood cells. Blood transfusions and antibiotics, administered by Marcolongo, saved the patient's life.

Realizing the problems of language and culture for foreign visitors Dr. Marcolongo started the worldwide list of North American/European-trained doctors that could be made available for travelers. There are now over 200,000 contributing members who receive the directory containing 850 doctors working in 125 countries.

# IAMAT Clinics

## Cancún

**Cancún Hyperbaric Clinic**, Alcatraces L44, M10 SM 22, ☎ 892-7680 or 882-0274, cell 998-105-7791, hiperbarica@prodigy.net.mx.

## Cozumel

**Clinica San Miguel**, Calle 6 #132, ☎ 987-23241, cell 49-871-9055.

## Puerto Aventuras

**Omni Puerto Aventuras Beach Resort**, ☎ 984-801-0127 or 806-3251, docbaldwin@prodigy.net.mx.

# Hospitals

**Star Medica Hospitals** are a chain found throughout Mexico. Their services are reported to be very good. Visit www.starmedica.com for more information.

**Alternative medicines** are popular and as North Americans get more and more into natural health, the practice of herbal treatment for minor ailments will increase. Maya, who learned from their ancestors the art of herbal medicine are willing to treat or share information with visitors. However, for more serious ailments like a burst appendix or a broken leg, I recommend the use of traditional scientific medicine using strong drugs and surgery.

# Emergency Services

**Medic Alert** is an emergency response service that has been in business since 1956. If you have a medical condition that could result in your hospitalization while you are in an unconscious state, then one of their bracelets, with membership number, should be worn. The emergency medical staff contacts the 24-hour service at Medic Alert, who in response relays your medical conditions and necessary precautions. They also alert your family. Medic Alert can be contacted at ☎ 888-633-4298 in the US or 209-668-3333 from elsewhere, www.medicalert.org.

**Critical Air Ambulance**, ☎ 800-247-8326 or 800-010-0268, is a team of medical experts that transports patients with multiple injuries, cardiac failure, severe head injuries, cerebral bleeds and so forth to the nearest fully equipped hospital in the United States. If your medical insurance covers air evacuation, then they may well use this company. If not, keep

the number handy in case you or a member of your group needs to get home quickly. The cost would be around $10,000.

**Sky Med**, ☎ 800-475-9633 in the US and Canada, 866-805-9624 in Mexico, www.skymed.com, is another company that takes emergency patients home. They also insure that your vehicle and belongings get home. They allow a companion to travel at your bedside during the trip. Sky Med will take Canadians to a Canadian hospital if time permits. Membership is not expensive, especially for anyone doing extreme sports where the chance of accidents is high. The annual cost per family is $360 per year plus $60 application fee. Helicopter coverage is an additional $75. An individual with the same coverage pays $180 per year plus $60 application fee and an additional $75 for helicopter coverage. Short-term coverage depends on the time covered. A four-day package costs $72 for a family and $36 per person plus the extra charge of $75 for helicopter coverage.



## Water

Tap water, called purified water, is considered safe to drink. If you feel uncomfortable with this, bottled water is available throughout the country. Bottles come in sizes from half a liter (a pint) to four liters (one gallon).

When there is no sign stating otherwise, water is considered drinkable. If there is a sticker with "W1" or "W2" on it, that means the water is untreated and not drinkable. However, these stickers are not common so, to be safe, if you are uncertain about the purity of the water, buy bottled.

Tamarind is a fruit/seed used to prepare a tart drink that serves as a thirst quencher and a laxative.

# Money Matters

Costs in Mexico are comparatively low, even though prices have gotten higher with the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement. You can expect to pay about half of what you would in the United States for a comparable vacation. There are often all-inclusive packages that are almost as cheap as airfare alone and those going on a strict budget can expect to find clean hotels for about $20 a night. The cost of an average vacation in a three-star hotel with restaurant food and at least one activity a day will be about $100 per person per day. If you are sharing a room, the cost drops.

## Banking/Exchange

The local currency is the peso and it is indicated in Mexico by the $ sign (in this guide, however, we show prices in US$). Each peso is divided into 100 centavos. Coins come in denominations of 10, 20 and 50 centavos and one,

two, five, 10 and 20 pesos. Notes come in the two, five, 10, 20, 50, 100, 200 and 500 peso denominations. At time of writing the exchange rate was about 11 pesos per US$1 and 16 pesos per euro.

**Foreign currency exchange** can be done at banks or Casas des Cambios. Banks are open from 9 am to 1:30 pm, Monday to Friday, and a few are open on Saturday afternoons. Casas are open later in the day but seldom on Sundays. The exchange for cash is always higher (you get more pesos per dollar than for traveler's checks). Resorts change traveler's checks.

**Traveler's checks** issued by Visa, American Express or Thomas Cook are accepted throughout the country and the preferred currency is the American dollar. However, with ATMs they are verging on extinction.

There is an electronic version of the traveler's check offered by Custom House, www.customhouse.com. The retail offices offer the limited liability debit card. You deposit your travel dollars in an account and they give you a **debit card** with their name on it. You also get a PIN number. You can then access the money at any ATM or debit machine that has the Master Card/Maestro logo. There is no possibility of identity theft because your name is not attached to the card in any way. The cost is $2.50 per transaction. If you run out of money, a person at home can go to Custom House and deposit more money. The only downside is that, if the PIN is lost, the money goes with it. Custom House suggests you leave a copy of the number at home. I would suggest you e-mail it to yourself, hidden in a message so that you have access to it at all times.

There are over 9,000 **ATMs** throughout the country. Finding one is never a problem, although they are usually not visible from the street. Grocery stores are good places to access them because you have the protection of a crowd and a gun-wielding guard. You can normally access $500 per day from your account (as long as the cash is in there to begin with) and that is usually more than enough for Mexico.

The **Mexican banks** are listed below. Some websites will give you the going exchange rate for the day, others show available locations, and some give you almost nothing beneficial to a traveler.

- Banamex – www.banamex.com
- Banco de Mexico – www.banxico.org.mx
- Bancrecer – www.bancrecer.com.mx
- Bancomext – www.bancomext.com
- Cancomer – www.bancomer.com.mx
- Banorte – www.banorte.com
- Bital – www.bital.com.mx
- Citibank Mexico – www.citibank.com/mexico
- Santander – www.santander.com.mx
- Scotiabank – www.scotiabankinverlat.com

**Credit cards** are acceptable anywhere, except in the tiniest food stall or market merchant. The most common are Visa, ☎ 95-800-847-2399,

www.visa.com, MasterCard, ☎ 800-424-7787, www.mastercard.com, and American Express, ☎ 44-1273-696933, www.americanexpress.com. Many upscale restaurants accept the Diner's Club Card, ☎ 52-5-580-1677, www.dinersclub.com.

Should you need money wired from home, **Money Gram** at ☎ 800-824-2220, www.moneygram.com, and **Western Union** at ☎ 800-325-6000 for customer service in English or, to locate an agent, www.westernunion.com.



## Taxes & Tipping

There is a 15% Value Added Tax on everything except medicines and food purchased at grocery stores. Hotels have a 12% tax and you may also be charged a 10% service charge over the quoted price for the room or meal. Ask before booking or paying.

Tipping is expected in restaurants and hotels. However, if a service charge is added to the bill, a tip is not necessary. Taxi drivers appreciate tips. The average is between 10% and 15%, depending on the service, for restaurants (or taxis). Bellboys receive about $1-$2 and for room service (maid) the average is $1-$2 per day.

## Price Scales

In the hotel sections of this book, I give a price range rather than a fixed rate. The price for a single and double room is the same unless otherwise stated and all prices are in US dollars. Use these rates as a guideline only; always call and verify current prices. Note than the prices in Cancún average $25 more. For each restaurant/hotel, I give my personal impression, followed by a brief review.

| HOTEL PRICE CHART | |
|---|---|
| Cost per night for two before tax | |
| $ | Under $50 |
| $$ | $51-$100 |
| $$$ | $101-$175 |
| $$$$ | $176-$250 |
| $$$$$ | Over $250 |

## Planning Expenses

If you make all your own arrangements, your cheapest day could run about $50 per person. This would include a basic room with a fan, two meals in the market or one of the smaller, local restaurants and the entrance fee to one attraction. Should you want to do more adventurous things like whale watching, diving or playing golf, the price goes up substantially. If you'd like a better hotel, $50 a day is below average and drinks with dinner raise the daily cost considerably.

To go first class, enjoying a piña-colada in an air-conditioned lounge while watching the sun set over the Caribbean and using a rented car rather than public transportation, the cost would run between $250 and $500 per day. Most people budget for somewhere between the two

extremes. There are, of course, places that are more luxurious and run around $1,000 or more per day.

*Measurements:* Mexico is metric, distance is in kilometers, and gas is sold in liters. Temperatures are in Celsius although to accommodate the North American tourist, they are often also in Fahrenheit.

# Dangers & Annoyances

Some businesses and houses are secured by high concrete walls with glass shards or razor-wire cemented along the top. Steel bars encase windows. Inside the walls, guard dogs or security guards armed with machine guns protect the premises. Banks always have armed guards, as do some of the better-classed restaurants. This high-security indicates high crime.

To prevent being ripped off, always ask the price, especially if the item you want is not on the menu or if the taxi has to wait while you check out a room. If you are not comfortable with insisting on this kind of clarification, then an all-inclusive package may suit you better. If this also is not what you want, then Mexico may not be for you.

## Airport Security

Since 9-11, airport security has increased worldwide. Cameras and laptop computers are checked for explosives. People must remove their shoes. I have even seen security guards demand that passengers remove metal earrings.

However, some inconvenience can be avoided with certain precautions. For example, explosive powders from firecrackers can set off alarms, as can the residue of explosives from bullets used at firing ranges or from setting off explosives for avalanche control. It is illegal to transport firecrackers and if caught you are subject to a $25,000 fine and/or up to five years in prison. Fertilizers from golf courses and nitroglycerin for heart patients can also set off alarms. The most recent alarming substance is the glycerin in some hand lotions. You must not carry any liquid over 10 ounces.

Doing your part in avoiding these substances and quantities before going to the airport will help get you through security monitors without a problem.

For those with a foreign (to America) name, especially one like Garcia, Martinez, or Mohammad, be aware that you may be stopped at American

immigration for questioning. The interrogations usually last no longer than 10 or 15 minutes but they are irritating. Keep your humor and matters will be dealt with much more quickly.

If you are a frequent flier you can get a letter from customs declaring that you are not "the Garcia" or "Martinez" who has a criminal record.

## Common-Sense Precautions

Every country in the world has its robbers and petty thieves whether you're in the polite society of Japan or the northern wilds of Canada. If you hang out in the very poor sections of a city where you are unknown, if you are staggering drunk in a back alley, if you trust a stranger to hold your cash while you run to the washroom, you are going to have a sad tale to tell.

Theft is not a huge problem in the Yucatán. However, if your wallet is stolen, you probably won't get it back. You should have a small stash of mad money or a second ATM card somewhere other than in your purse or wallet. In 2006 there were 25 incidents of theft per 1,000 people, compared to 25 in the US and 22 in Canada.

When out, be aware of what is around you. If it seems you are being followed, go into a store or knock on someone's door. Make certain that expensive items such as your camera or Rolex watch are out of sight.

Take a taxi back to your room if you have been out late. Don't be inebriated in public. A drunk is a great target. Don't get mixed up in the dope trade. Save booze and dope for home. If you do get into trouble at home, you know the rules, you have friends to help and the prisons are far more comfortable than they are in Mexico. Recently there has been coverage of Canadians languishing in jail because they couldn't pay exorbitant bribes. Be careful.

Women should walk with confidence. If you appear frightened or lost, you are a target. Don't walk alone in unpopulated places such as jungles or secluded beaches. In the event that you are grabbed or accosted in any way, create a scene. Holler, scream, kick and fight with all your might. However, if you are approached by someone with a weapon, let them have it all. Being dead or seriously maimed isn't worth any possession you might have, including your virginity.

## Liquor

The legal age for drinking is 18 and taking a child into licensed premises is not prohibited. Alcohol can be purchased at local grocery stores, some of which are open 24 hours a day. Drunk driving is not advisable both for safety reasons and because it is illegal. The police are clamping down on inebriated drivers.

Although drinking on the streets and beaches is common, be aware that if you are getting a tad tipsy, it is wise to stay out of site of the Mexican police. Go to your hotel and stay either in the confines of their bars or in your own room.

## Drugs

Don't. Mexican jails are uncomfortable. Under Mexican law, you are presumed guilty until proven innocent. There are as many honest cops as there are corrupt ones and relying on your luck to get one who can be bribed so you can get out of trouble is not advisable. Save the thrill of gambling for the casino.

Although drug trafficking is huge in Mexico, it doesn't mean there's a tolerance for it. Be certain your prescription drugs are in original containers, well labeled and if you purchase diet drugs in Mexico, you could get a jail term in the US for possession of an illegal substance. On the other hand, antibiotics can be purchased without a prescription in Mexico and you probably won't be hassled if you have some in your possession when returning home.

## Police

Mexico has almost as many types of police as it has beaches. There are the Federal Police and the Federal Traffic Police. The Federal Police have no jurisdiction over immigration documents or other tourist matters. If you are stopped and asked to show documents by these people, tell them to come to your hotel. Once there, have the manager call your consulate. Because of low wages, these police have a reputation for being corrupt.

City Police forces are notorious for corruption, although this is changing. A Mexico City cop now earns about $900 a month, a substantial amount, which helps eliminate corruption. Even so, getting into trouble in Mexico is often dealt with by paying bribes.

There is a very good side to the Mexican police force. The Tourist Police, recognized by their white and brown uniforms with a "Policia Touristica" insignia on the right sleeve, are conspicuous in tourist areas. Besides offering protection, they will assist in finding hospitals, restaurants, embassies and so on. Many speak English. If you are robbed or harmed in any way, report all instances to the Tourist Police and to your consulate.

While driving, you may be stopped and asked for a small contribution to the benefit of the officer. This is called a "mordida." I suggest that, if stopped, whether guilty or not, ask for the ticket or the "boleto." The worst that can happen is you will pay a fine for the infraction you have committed. If you pay a traffic ticket within 24 hours, the cost is half. The best that can happen is that the officer will walk away and let you go with a warning.

The **Green Angels** (Angeles Verdes) are Mexico's national road emergency service that is assigned to help motorists on major highways. They have a fleet of 300 trucks that patrol fixed sections of major highways twice a day. Drivers speak both English and Spanish, can help with mechanical problems, have first aid, radio/telephone communications and can tow a broken down vehicle into a garage. Although this is a free service, a tip is always appreciated. They can be reached at ☎ 01-800-983-1184.

The Consumer Protection service known as the **Secreteria y Fomento Turistico** (SEFOTUR) handles complaints about businesses in Mexico. They are located in all major centers and if you have problems with a merchant or company, it is highly advisable to report them to this agency.

**Prisons** are for the most part overcrowded due to prisoners awaiting trial. The state of the prisoner usually depends on how much money the family can provide to enable the prisoner to purchase his daily needs. Paying bribes to the guards is often necessary for prisoners to receive goods from their family. Some prisons have cells that are 10 feet (three m) by six feet (two m) accommodating three men. Often men are forced to sleep on benches, and use only cold water for washing and open buckets as toilets. Female prisoners are often in the same building as males. Females are permitted, in some prisons, to keep their children up to the age of three. However, this is not consistent throughout the country. All in all, prisons are not places where one wants to vacation.



# Need to Know

## Hours of Business

Business hours are usually between 8 or 9 am until 8 or 9 pm in the larger cities and resort areas like Cancún but they close between 2 and 4 pm for siesta in the smaller towns.

Banking hours are Monday to Friday, 9 am to between 3 pm and 7 pm. However, with ATMs available everywhere, banking isn't usually a problem.

## Electricity

Mexico has 110 AC, the same as Canada and the US. Disruption of electricity is common only in small communities. However, three-prong plugs, with one going to ground, may still be difficult to find in private hotels. Adapter units are available and should be brought from home.

# Communication

## Telephone

In the Yucatán, local numbers have seven digits and numbers do not need an area code within each area.

### To Call Mexico from Another Country

1. Call 011 to access the international line.
2. Dial 52 to access the country lines.
3. Dial two or three digit numbers to access the area.
4. Dial the seven-digit number to access your desired line.

### To call Outside The Country from Mexico

1. Dial 00 to access the international line.
2. Dial 1 to access Canada or the US, 44 to access England.
3. Dial your three-digit number to access the area.
4. Dial your seven-digit number to access your desired line.

*Beware!* Calling an 800 number within Mexico is toll-free but if dialing an 800 number in the US from Mexico, you will pay the same price as any other call to that area.

Most public phones require a calling card. Ladatel cards are sold in 20 or 50 peso denominations and are available at stores, restaurants and automated machines in the airport and bus station.

### Useful Numbers

- Directory assistance in Mexico: 040
- Operator assistance for an international call: 020 and, for a local calls, dial 090
- Emergency: ☎ 065 or 060
- 24-hour tourist assistance: ☎ 01-800-9-0392
- Operator-assisted international long distance: ☎ 090
- Operator-assisted national long distance: ☎ 020
- Automatic national long distance: ☎ 01
- Automatic long distance to Canada and the US: ☎ 001
- Information: ☎ 040
- Tourist help line: ☎ 078
- Tourist legal assistance: ☎ 5625-8153 (located in Mexico City)

For area codes, go to www.telmex.com and click on English Version and then on Area Code by State. There you can type in the name of the town and get the area code.

If you have an account with the following companies their numbers are listed below. To call a 1-800 number from Mexico, you will dial 001-800 and then their seven digits. Remember that 800 numbers dialed from Mexico will be charged as long distance calls.

- Sprint – ☎ 800-877-8000
- AT&T – ☎ 800-288-2872 or 01-800-112-2020 for Spanish
- Teleglobe Canada – ☎ 800-123-0200

You may also be a customer of companies such as World Wide Callback, www.worldwidecallback.com, where a "Callback" number is dialed from anywhere in the world. Once you have dialed and the ring sound is heard, you hang up and they call you back. Then you give them the number you are trying to reach, they connect you to the number and, finally, you are charged American rates. This system must be set up before you travel.

## Internet

Internet Cafés are as common as shoeshine boys and cost between $1 and $3 per hour. Most resorts have wireless connections.

## Mail/Courier Services

It's easy and safe to send or receive mail. It takes from five to seven days for a letter/post card to reach the United States from anywhere in Mexico. The cost for a letter is about 40¢ for up to 20 grams. Post cards cost one peso and take about a week to get to anywhere in the US or Canada. Parcels don't have to be inspected before being sent so they can be wrapped before taking them to the post office. Insurance is highly recommended for parcels.

Besides post offices, Mexico has international courier services such as Federal Express, www.fedex.com/us/about/unitedstates/contact, Airborne Express, ☎ 5-785-4280, and DHL, www.dhl.com.mx/publish/mx/es/tools/dropoff/escri_exel.high.html and the Mexican company, SACPAQ, www.solunet-infomex.com/mexbdir/company.cfm?company=1562201_SACPAQ_SA_DE_CV_Mrida_Yucatán.

## Mexican Newspapers

***El de Yucatán***, www.Yucatan.com.mx, covers both national and international news but focuses mostly on the Yucatán.

***Reforma***, www.reforma.com.

***El Financiero***, www.elfinanciero.com.mx/pages, gives a summary of daily events about Mexico's economy.

***La Jornada***, www.jornada.unam.mx/indexfla.php, is mostly left-wing in its coverage.

***El Universal***, www.eluniversal.com.mx/noticiash.html is a mainstream newspaper with everything from headlines to horoscopes.

***Milenio***, www.milenio.com/mexico, has both national and international news plus a general interest section that is good.

***Cronica***, www.cronica.com.mx, is a general news daily.

***Proceso***, www.proceso.com.mx, is a full coverage daily.

***Expansion***, www.expansion.com.mx, features American news, though it's in Spanish.

***Mexico Daily***, www.mexicodaily.com, is an English-language on-line newspaper reporting on international news.

## Yucatán Tourist Publications

***Yucatán Today***, www.Yucatántoday.com, in English/Spanish, is a free publication that comes out every other month. It has useful maps, lists of events and some hotel reviews.

*Cozumel* is another English/Spanish glossy with suggested places to eat, places to visit and hotels.

***Quinta***, www.la5ta.com, is a bi-monthly magazine covering the southern Yucatán peninsula. Squeezed between the glossy ads, it has reviews in English of the latest hot spots, be they nightclubs or resorts.

***Explore Yucatán***, is a free English-language publication covering events in Mérida and surrounding area.

***Cancún Tips***, www.cancuntips.com.mx, is a free semi-annual English-language publication that has excellent maps.

# Consulates in Cancún

**Belgium**, Ave Tulum 192, Center, ☎ 892-2512

**Canada**, Plaza Caracol, Local 330, Hotel Zone, ☎ 883-3360

**Cuba**, Pecari 17, Center, ☎ 884-3423

**Denmark**, Omni Hotel, Hotel Zone, ☎ 881-0600
**Finland**, Ave Nader, Popol-Na Bldg, Center, ☎ 884-1600
**France**, Fonatur St. Los Alamos, Center, ☎ 267-9722
**Germany**, Punta Conoco St #36, Center, ☎ 887-1283
**Great Britain**, Royal Sands Hotel, Hotel Zone, ☎ 881-0100, ext. 65898
**Italy**, Alcatraces #39, Center, ☎ 884-1261
**Poland**, Sierra #13, Center, ☎ 892-1764
**Spain**, Kukulcan Km 6.5, Hotel Zone, ☎ 848-9900
**Sweden**, Pabellon Caribe Bldg, Center, ☎ 892-3347
**Switzerland**, Venus Bldg 214, Ave Cobá, Center, ☎ 884-8446
**United States**, Plaza Caracol, Local 323, Hotel Zone, ☎ 883-0272
**Mexican Immigration Office**, Nadeer and Av Uxmal, ☎ 881-3560



# Culture Shock

## Public Affection

Once away from the beach resorts, you will find that Mexico is still a conservative country, so physical affection in public is not common. Holding hands seems to be OK, but passionate kissing, especially by same-sex couples, is still frowned upon. Mexico is a Catholic country where most people still follow the laws of the church.

## Gay & Lesbian Travel

There are numerous gay- and lesbian-friendly bars and hotels. Cancún has a gay festival. Although the possibility of finding a same-sex relationship with a Mexican exists, you must be careful not to think that because a Mexican has sex with you that s/he is gay. Some Mexicans look at having same-gender sex as entertainment, not a way of life.

## Special Needs Travelers

Wheelchair accessibility is available at resorts. Taxis are plentiful and some can accommodate a wheelchair.

As for visiting smaller villages and hamlets, wheelchair accessibility is rare, streets are narrow and uneven and street-level bathrooms almost non-existent. Guardrails in bathrooms are also rare.

Visiting the larger Maya ruins is good although some trails are not paved and pushing a wheelchair may take some strength.

Blind or deaf people should have an assistant.

## Toilets

Be aware that the sewer systems in Mexico are not like those in the United States or Europe. All upmarket hotels have modern sewers. However, in older hotels, toilet paper is placed in a basket beside the toilet rather than in it. It is a huge problem when those unaccustomed to this method of disposal refuse to follow the rules. Please be sensitive to the needs of the Mexican Public Service Department and put your paper in the basket.

## Human Rights

President Vincente Fox tried to establish some accountability for those who committed serious human rights abuses in the past, especially during the 1960s and 1970s "Dirty War" period. A Freedom of Information law has resulted in 80 million files pertaining to the abuses between 1952 and 1985 being released.

A special government office was opened to look into these abuses but, due to lack of money, it so far has been ineffectual. As a result, the military and the police are still not accountable for their crimes. Even now, those opposing the government or the police are sometimes killed or sentenced to long prison terms for minor crimes. Confessions are sometimes obtained under torture. Foreign human rights workers have a difficult time getting visas to work in Mexico and those who are successful are subject to harassment.

The drug trade has been President Felipe Calderon's main focus. His attempted crackdown has resulted in numerous gang wars. Disappearances and kidnappings are still a huge problem, with alleged police involvement high. According to a recent book, from 1994 to 2007 there were 7,836 persons kidnapped in Mexico, 438 of them in 2007. Citizens are arrested and detained without due process and indigenous people's access to fair treatment is abused. Human trafficking is still unbridled as is violence against women, homosexuals and indigenous people.

However, Calderon, like Fox before him, has been trying to work with organizations to eliminate some human rights abuses. In the Yucatán, abuses won't be too obvious.

According to Amnesty International, torture and ill treatment was present in Mexico last year but it was in Canada too. On the other hand, there have been disappearances and prisoners of conscience in Mexico (none in Canada).

# Food

Mexican food needs no explaining to most readers because we have as many Mexican restaurants as they have pollo (chicken) and pizza joints. Mexican food is usually made up of onions, tomatoes, rice, beans, corn, eggs, cheese and pollo. These foods are usually accompanied with a corn tortilla.

However, with the proliferation of tourism, you can now get a huge variety of ethnic foods in Mexico. There are Chinese, Japanese, Bavarian, Thai, Frech, Italian, and more cafés in all major tourist areas. Along the coast, **seafood** or fish is the most popular meal. Be certain to try some **ceviche**, a raw fish or seafood pickled in lime juice or a **Pescado Veracruz**, which is fish smothered in fresh tomato and onion sauce.

In the tropics, seasonal fruits are abundant. Try **guanabana**, a slimy white yet succulent fruit, or **guava**, especially if your stomach is a bit queasy. Guava slows down peristaltic action in the gut. Try the **mango**; when fresh there is nothing like it. **Banana con leche** (banana with milk) or fresh squeezed **orange/grapefruit** will always refresh you. Others to try are **avocados**, **grapes**, **papayas** (larger than those found in North America), **peaches**, freshly picked **peanuts**, **pears**, **pineapples**, **strawberries**, **watermelon** and **prickly pears**.

For an on-line glossary of Mexican cooking terms, go to: www.lomexico.com/mexicanfoodrecipeglossary.htm.

## Favorite Dishes

**Enchiladas** are tortillas stuffed with ground meat, beans, and cheeses. **Tostada** is the same thing only the tortilla is toasted and left flat on the plate.

**Guacamole** is mashed avocado with onion, tomato and lime juice. This is often served as an appetizer or included as one of the sauces for a meal. One medium avocado has 350 calories.

**Mole de pollo** or **Mole povlano**, a tasty brown sauce cooked with chicken or turkey, is the national dish. However, the actual mole sauce can be served as anything from a dark thick soup to a green sauce with red, yellow and black moles, each made with different ingredients. For example, the green mole is made with toasted pumpkin seeds and the dark mole is made with chocolate. **Chilmole** or **relleno-negro** is a sauce made from orange juice, chiles, cloves, allspice, black peppers, oregano, cumin and garlic. This is cooked with the meat (chicken or turkey) and is a tasty favorite.

**Tamales** are a feast dish, taking hours to make and minutes to devour. They are made with tiny pieces of meat, chiles, fish, frogs, beans, turkey,

squash seeds or any combination of these, covered with a corn-flour paste and rolled into banana leaves. They are then steamed or roasted. Prior to the arrival of the Spanish, the locals made tamales for the gods as well as themselves. Some were made with special designs such as spirals, while others were huge, weighing up to a hundred pounds.

> *Chef's Secret:* The secret of good tamales is that the cook must have blaring music in the background or the delicacy won't turn out.

**Quesadillas** are wheat-flour tortillas and are the same as tostadas, only cooked with lots of melted cheese on top.

**Frijoles refrito**s are fried beans. In Mexico, it matters not whether it's breakfast, snack, meal of the day or beer – frijoles will appear. Served with sour cream, they are delicious and an excellent source of protein.

## Yucatán Specialties

- **Lime Soup** is made with strips of chicken, crushed tortillas and limejuice. Refreshing.
- **Pollo Pibil** is chicken (or pork) marinated in orange juice, garlic and cumin and then baked in a banana leaf..
- **Botanas** are snacks served with drinks in cantinas after the main lunch meal and include refried beans with tortilla chips, beets pickled in lemon and cilantro, puréed pumpkin seeds, ceviche, hummus and/or mini kibabs.

Bread has, with the demands of tourism, become available along with good French tortes or German strudels. Mexican pecan or key lime pies make the fat under your skin bubble on the first bite.

For a good glossary of Mexican foods, or recipes and interesting historical tidbits, go to TexMex website at www.texmextogo.com/glossary.htm.

Tequila is best consumed in one quick gulp. Take a pinch of salt in one hand and a piece of lime in the other. Lick the salt, suck the lime and then slug back the tequila. Once your eyes stop watering, slam down your glass, called a *caballito*, onto the table and shout "Agua!"

# Booking a Room

Many people book accommodations over the Internet. This is OK, but be aware that not everything on the Internet is true. Photos probably show only the best side of an establishment, and lighting plays a big part in making something look far more attractive than it

is. You will not see the cockroaches in the corners or hear the bus terminal next door. Rates quoted may be off-season, with no indication of high-season prices, and taxes may not be mentioned.

Ask questions before turning over your Visa number. Is there air conditioning or a fan? In a thatched-roof hut, air conditioning is useless because the cold air goes out through the roof. Is there hot water? How is it heated? Water heated on the roof by the sun is far cooler than water heated in a gas water tank.

What does "all-inclusive" mean? Is it rice and beans for three meals a day and a lawn chair around the pool or does it include excursions to sites? Do the prices include taxes and service charges?

Does the hotel accept credit cards and do they add a fee for this? Charging for this service is against their contract with the credit card companies but some places charge anyway. How close to other places are you? Will you have to stay where you are or be able to move around easily without having to pay high taxi costs?

If you do book ahead, print out all correspondence and keep the documentation with you. Some proprietors have been known to offer one rate, but charge another after the customer arrives. Booking through some on-line agencies has resulted in the guest not having a room and, if the hotel is fully booked, you will be out of pocket no matter how many pieces of paper you show the desk. Make certain you have read all the fine print.



# Getting Here

There are many options. For a luxurious stay near the beach, a tour agent from your own town can book your flight and hotel, so all you need to do is pack, grab your cash and credit cards, and get yourself to the airport. Or you may be on a long trip and arrive by traveling overland from the US, Guatemala or Belize. You may want to do nothing but visit one beach after another or stay on the same beach for the entire vacation. If you have specialized activities you would like to pursue, such as kayaking, birding or horseback riding, consider one of the companies that provides these activities as a main focus. You may want to fly with a charter and return on a non-changeable date. These tickets are usually the best deal, especially if you can negotiate the flight without hotels. Be certain to confirm your return schedule at least 72 hours before departure.

The most common air destination is Cancún, with over 1,000 direct flights per month, although flying from Mexico City to Mérida, Campeche or Chetumal is also possible.

## Airlines

**Aeromexico**, ☎ 800-237-6639, www.aeromexico.com, flies from major cities in the US and Canada to Cancún or Mérida.

**Air Canada**, www.aircanada.com, is not offering specials to Mexico at this time.

**Alaska Airlines**, ☎ 800-252-7522 or 800-468-2248 (for packages), www.alaskaair.com, serves 80 cities in the United States, Canada and Mexico, plus it also flies from Europe and Asia. I flew with them and found their prices the best, their planes full and their service friendly. I recommend this company.

**American**, ☎ 800-433-7300, www.aa.com, was one of the first airlines to fly passengers and cargo into Mexico. They fly from most major American and Canadian cities to Cancún. They too are very good.

**America West** (US Airways), ☎ 800-235-9292, www.americawest.com, leaves from major American centers to Cancún, Mérida or Chetumal.

**Aviacsa**, ☎ 800-735-5396, www.aviacsa.com.mx, flies between Houston or Las Vegas and Cancún or Chetumal. They also offer many flights inside Mexico.

**British Airways**, (no phone), www.britishairways.com/travel, offers flights from around the world to Cancún.

**Continental**, ☎ 800-231-0856, www.continentalairway.com, flies from Houston and Newark to 21 destinations in Mexico. Their website is difficult to negotiate.

**Delta**, ☎ 800-221-1212, www.delta.com/home/index.jsp, flies from many US cities, including Los Angeles, Dallas-Ft. Worth and Atlanta to Mexico City, Acapulco, Puerto Vallarta, and Guadalajara. Delta and American have just merged so they may, in the near future, fall under the same name. I don't know what that would be.

**Frontier** (no phone), www.frontierairline.com, goes to Cancún and Cozumel from most American and many Canadian cities. Many flights change in Denver.

**Mexicana**, ☎ 800-531-7921, www.mexicana.com, flies from major cities in Canada and the US to Cancún. Mexicana has been in business since the 1930's and has a good safety record.

**United**, ☎ 800-241-6522, www.united.com, flies from major American and Canadian cities to Cancún.

## Agents

There are numerous agents both on the Internet and in your hometown. Most can offer cheaper flights than booking direct with the airline but many also include a hotel booking in their packages. The advantage of going with an agent is you don't have to spend hours searching for the

perfect deal. Some agents specialize in themes like eco-tourism, bridal arrangements, kayaking/cycling tours or senior trips. If you book with an agent, you cannot change your ticket once you leave home; the agent must do it for you.

For those wanting to make their own arrangements, www.inn26.com lists hotels, guesthouses and resorts for Cancún/Mérida.



## Arriving at the Airport

When you fly into any Mexican airport, the procedure is simple. First you go through immigration where you will receive a 90-day (usually) visitors permit. You pick up your bags and head for customs inspection. You will be asked to push a button. If the light above the button turns green, you and your party will be free to go. If it turns red, the inspectors will check your bags for any forbidden substances.

There are banks at the airport along with some souvenir shops and places to eat. However, the airport is busy when planes are arriving and just a bit less busy between plane arrivals and departures, and the airport food is usually not good.

Some hotels include a shuttle to and from the airport. If your pick-up isn't included in the package, you can take a taxi to the hotel zone for $45 for two people or $50 for four. A private van can be ordered and costs $55 for eight-10 people. Those going along the Maya Riviera will pay $130-$150, depending on destination and number of people. To arrange this, book at www.cancunshuttle.com .

A Greyline bus, which you can pick up south of the airport entrance, costs $9 each way.

Public buses go to the central bus station and cost around seven pesos. From there a second bus, # R1, can be taken to the hotel zone.

## Bus Travel

Buses from Belize do not cross into or out of Mexico. You must change terminals in Chetumal if you wish to travel across the border.

Bus travel in Mexico can be first-class, second-class or peasant-class. The first-class buses are roomy, air-conditioned vehicles that often come with an attendant to look after your needs. The 44 seats on each bus are soft and they recline. Your lunch and a drink may be included in the price of the ticket and handed to you as you board the bus. There are clean toilets. Videos are played, but they are usually not too loud and occasionally in English. Some of the companies have private waiting rooms at the bus stations for their ticketed passengers. These companies also offer bathrooms not used by the general public.

Second-class bus service is almost as luxurious as first-class except you don't get lunch and the bus stops more frequently than first-class. They are more like the buses found in North America.

Peasant-class bus travel in Mexico is most interesting, although the least comfortable. You never get lunch or an attendant and the buses stop often along the way. No longer do buses go only when full or carry chickens going to/from market.

Prices for tickets run about $5 an hour for the best class and drop to just over half for second-class (usually) and even less for peasant-class. It is only the peasant-class tickets that do not have reserved seats. Bus drivers own the road and rule the bus. They know their jobs and do them well. If you don't want to walk, do as they suggest.

The bus stations are generally large buildings on the outskirts of cities, although in Cancún it is in the center. You must pay a 25¢ (25 cents? not worth mentioning)tax if using buses from the terminals and occasionally your carry-on luggage will be searched by security.

**ADO**, corner of Tulum and Uxmal, Cancún, ☎ 884-5542 or 887-4622, www.adogl.com.mx/en/index.htm, is by far the most popular first-class bus company in Mexico. You can book on line but must arrive one hour before departure and present your credit card to pay for the ticket, along with your passport for identification. There are segregated bathrooms, kitchen areas to make tea or coffee and individual reading lights.

There are ADO stations in most locations you would visit. Go to the website and search your desired destination for the address and telephone numbers. ADO accepts credit cards.

## Car or RV Travel

Before entering Mexico with a vehicle you must have an American, Canadian or International Driver's License. At the border you must apply for a temporary vehicle importation permit. For this you need proof of ownership, registration, proof of citizenship and an affidavit from any lien holders allowing this temporary importation. This permit is good for six months and can be used for multiple entries. The permit, costing $15, must be paid by Visa, MasterCard or American Express credit card and must be pasted onto the windshield. It proves that you paid to bring the vehicle in and it shows the date when you must have the vehicle out of the country. If you overstay, your vehicle will be confiscated. RV's require an additional permit. It is illegal to leave your vehicle in Mexico unless you pay a 30% tax levied on its value.

The main roads are all paved, double-lane highways. Secondary roads are paved but narrow and winding with almost no shoulders. Some roads going to out-of-the-way ruins are potted so badly that I would recommend walking rather than driving.

The speed limits are reasonable – 65-100 km/hr (40-60 mph) and there are the Green Angels around on the main highways should you run into any mechanical problems (see page 77). Maps are accurate and signs well posted. There are RV parks where you can stay all along the coast and most allow tenting. Many hotels offer some sort of off-street parking, which is necessary if leaving a vehicle overnight.

One problem with driving a large motor home is congestion in towns. It can even make walking a hazard, never mind driving. Also, driving along the secondary roads at night should be avoided as there are always animals, one-lane bridges and cars without headlights. There are three times as many road fatalities at night as during the day. There are also speed bumps (silent policemen) at the entrance and exit of every town or village. These should be approached slowly. Avoid parking in secluded places.

If you decide to bring your car, be certain it is in top shape – good/new tires, tuned-up motor, carburetor overhaul, and so on. Repairs in Mexico can be expensive. If taking a motor home, don't overload it. You can purchase anything you may want or need in Mexico and often the price is lower than at home.

If you hire a car watcher while you are away from your vehicle, the watcher should earn about a dollar an hour. If you hire a valet to park your car, the tip is should be about $1.

Legally, drivers must use seat belts but passengers need not, although it is advisable. Riding in the back of a pickup truck is legal. Drinking and driving is prohibited but passengers can drink in a vehicle. For motorcyclists, there is no helmet law.

**Gasoline** is available from the government-owned petroleum company, Premex. Some stations have car washes and mini-marts and offer oil changes. There are three grades of gas. Nova is the lowest grade and price and is sold from the blue colored pumps. RVs should not use Nova as the octane level is far too low for good engine performance. Magna sin, sold from the green pumps, is the mid-grade fuel and has an octane level of around 86. It is equal to regular gas in the US or Canada. Premium gas, the best, is sold only in larger centers. Diesel is available and is praised by RV drivers, who claim it is superior to American fuel in cleanliness. It is recommended that RVs have a pre-filter installed and fuel/water separators to protect their pumps and injectors. Gasoline costs $3.25-$3.40 per gallon and diesel is about $2.50 per gallon (April 2008).

## Toll Roads

When pulling up to the tollbooth note that most motor homes and pickup trucks are classified as two-axle vehicles. If you are towing a trailer or a boat, you will be charged according to the number of axles.

There are just under 500 miles (800 km) of toll road in the Yucatán and the toll cost from Cancún to Mérida is $300 pesos ($10). This is a four-lane

speedway and by far the fastest route from one end of the peninsula to the other.

According to www.Yucatantoday.com, taking the toll road from Mérida to Cancún means you avoid 83 topes (speed bumps) and 43 villages (speed limit 40 km/hr), which means you save on gas and tranquilizers.

## Toll Costs

Be certain you have pesos for the toll booths.

Cancún to Mérida . . . . . $300 pesos
Cancún to Valladolid . . . . . $47 pesos
Chichén Itzá to Valladolid . . . . . $47 pesos
Meria to Campeche . . . . . $62 pesos
Mérida to Chichén Itzá . . . . . $63 pesos
Mérida to Valladolid . . . . . $47 pesos

## Police/Tickets

At one time it was common to pay the police a bribe and be on your way. This, with increased tourism, is changing. If a police officer stops you and accuses you of a violation, politely ask for the "boleto." If he issues a ticket, chances are you are guilty. The officer will take your driver's license, which you will get back after paying the ticket at the nearest city hall. If you pay the ticket within 24 hours it is about half the full cost.

If you are not guilty of a crime, the police officer will probably send you on your way with a warning not to do what he charged you with doing. Smile, say thank you and be gone.

When I rented a car in the Yucatán, the rental company advised me over and over again not to speed. The most likely offence committed by a gringo is speeding and police are always on the watch for it.

## Mexican Insurance

Mexican car insurance is essential. Foreign insurance is of no value. Borders have insurance companies for your convenience. If renting a car (see *Rentals*) take everything they will sell.

There are two components to consider when in an accident. First, the damages to the car, the property, the person, medical expenses and loss of wages must be considered. Then the moral damages are calculated. This is the pain and suffering incurred by the injured and in Mexico this is usually about one third of what the actual damages are. You then have the choice of a civil or criminal case. In a criminal case, the victim receives an appointed lawyer and the liability is not limited. In the worst-case scenario, should you be at fault for killing someone, you must pay for the damaged vehicle, medical expenses incurred, funeral expenses and loss of deceased's wages for his working life. This would be calculated at the minimum daily wage of the person killed. Moral damages would be

added to this. For the average tourist, $100,000 liability coverage should be adequate.

In the event of an accident you must (after helping the injured of course) first and always, contact your insurance company. They know what to say and do. Do not sign anything or answer questions until you have a legal representative present. This is your right as a driver. If arrested you have the right to bail, the amount of which is determined by a court official. Should you be under the influence of drugs or alcohol, you may be detained – for a long time.



### Insurance Companies

There are numerous companies selling insurance. Be aware that some companies are fly-by-nighters. Take the recommendations given here or those of a trusted friend.

**International Insurance-Seguros**, 1047 W. Madero, Mesa, AZ, ☎ 480-345-0191, www.globalmedicalplans.com, sells car, boat, and medical insurance. They are responsive and knowledgeable. Patricia Romero Hamrick is a lady with years of experience in the Mexican insurance business. It is important to know that Mexican insurance claims can end up in court for years, where American insurance claims are usually settled quickly. You can purchase car insurance from this Mexican Company before you head down to Mexico. This way the transaction is in English. This company also sells medical insurance that includes emergency evacuation and reunion.

**Sanborn's Insurance**, Headquarters, ☎ 800-222-0158, www.sanbornsinsurance.com, is a large company stationed in Mexico. They have also been around for a long time.

**Seguros Tepeyac**, ☎ 800-837-3922, were founded in 1944 so they are reliable. They belong to the MAPFRE system from Spain and operate in 26 countries.

**DriveMex.com**, ☎ 866-367-5053, www.drivemex.com, is operated by Comerco Courtage Inc. If their insurance is as good as the website, this may be a company to try.

## Arriving by Water

There are four international ports of entry in the Yucatán. They are at Progreso, Puerto Morelos, Cozumel and Majahual. You may arrive by private boat or cruise ship. If taking a cruise, your agent will look after necessary documents. You will need this guidebook, some money and your passport.

### Private Boat

If sailing a vessel into Mexico, you will need to see the immigration office at the port of entry for a tourist visa and a temporary import permit for

your boat. For this you must have ownership papers proving the boat is yours or the lease agreement if the vessel is rented, a passport and an arrival and departure clearance document. You must post a bond using a major credit card at the Banjercito bank for the value of the vessel plus an added $10 for processing fees.

Once in the country you must register your boat at a marina. The operator will inform the taxation office and the custom's office of your registration. If you plan on sailing from one port to another you will need an arrival and departure clearance document. For more specific information on sailing in Mexico go to www.tijuana.com/boatcrossing.

### Boat Outfitters

There is little demand for yacht sailing in the Yucatán and if you wish to have a chartered trip along this coast it would be better to go to Belize.

### Cruises

Although I don't care for cruises myself, I have listed two companies that can help if you want to find out about this option.

**Cruise Ship Centers**, ☎ 866-358-7285, 800-707-7327 (Canada) or 877-791-7676 (US), www.cruiseshipcenters.com, offers cruises that stop at Cozumel. If you want your every need catered for, to eat more exotic foods than your encyclopedia could list, and to enjoy Mexico, this is one good choice. The ships have climbing walls, jogging tracks, mini golf, fitness and dance classes, spa facilities, pools and hot tubs, deck games, casinos, lounges, art auctions, duty-free shopping and facilities for children. The different restaurants are too many to name. The cost for cruises starts at about $750 per person. Remember that cruise ships don't allow you to bring your own liquor on board. If drinking is a priority, remember to factor this into your expenses.

**Royal Caribbean**, ☎ 800-511-4848, has six-day trips that stop in Cozumel, where you can take a tour to Tulum or snorkel along the reefs. There are luxurious staterooms that start at $250 a day and regular rooms cost about $100 a day, depending on the time of year. This is all-inclusive. The boat has two pools, nine bars, a cinema, a fitness center, a spa, a casino and children's facilities.

# Getting Around

## By Plane

There are numerous companies working in Mexico:

**Aeromexico**, ☎ 800-237-6639, www.aeromexico.com, flies from many cities in North America to Chetumal, Campeche, Cancún and Mérida.

**Mexicana**, ☎ 800-531-7921, www.mexicana.com flies to Chetumal, Cozumel, Campeche, Cancún and Mérida.

**Alaska Air**, ☎ 800-252-7522 or 800-468-2248, www.alaskaair.com, flies from Mexico City to Cancún.

**Aviacsa**, ☎ 800-735-5396, www.aviacsa.com.mx, offers flights from many cities in Mexico to Chetumal, Cancún and Mérida.

**Aerocalifornia**, ☎ 800-237-6225, www.aerocalifornia.de, offers flights between Mérida and Mexico City.

Local charters are available but many must be booked through a hotel. An exception is **Aero Saab**, ☎ 873-0501, www.aerosaab.com, that offers tours and private charters at $110 for 15 minutes or $350 for one hour for up to five people from Playa del Carmen, Cancún, and Cozumel. Tours to Holbox Island are $475-$590 for a five-hour trip. Make reservations on their website.

There are domestic **airports** at Campeche (3.6 miles/six km from the center), Mérida (eight miles/13 km from the center), Chetumal, (1.2 miles/two km from the center), Playa del Carmen (in town) and Cozumel (1.8 miles/three km from the center).

Note that ticket changes are costly in Mexico, usually running 25%. Arrive at the airport early since your seat could otherwise be sold to someone on the standby list. Carry on as much as possible. Lost luggage in Mexico is not fun, can take days to sort out and often no compensation is offered while you wait for it to arrive.

## By Bus

Buses offer visitors a chance to see more of the country than planes. Watching the countryside and talking to locals is fun and Mexican bus travel can be more luxurious than in the US and Canada. For costs and different classes of bus travel see pages 87-88.

Numerous bus companies serve most destinations. If there is no direct bus, there are others that will go to the nearest city en route where you can connect to another bus going to your destination. For example, should

you wish to go to the village of Tekum, take a bus from Mérida to Cancún, get off at Valladolid and hop another going to Tekum.

Tickets can be purchased in advance on the Internet from the first-class company, ADO. They accept major credit cards and most stations have an ATM. Baggage is labeled and you receive a ticket that must be presented before you get your bags back. Occasionally, you will have to go through a wand-over-body security check. Theft of baggage is not a concern. It is customary to give the baggage handler a few pesos for his service.

Night travel is comfortable, children are quiet and there are no chickens in the carry-on luggage. It is better to sleep on the right-hand side of the bus where the glare of oncoming headlights is less.

## By Car

If driving your own vehicle, see the Introduction, page 88. If renting, you can book with any of the main car rental companies available in the US and Canada. Each privately owned company is listed in their respective cities. Mexican car insurance is essential (see pages 90-91) and a valid driver's license or international license is required. One must be 25 years of age or older and be able to produce a credit card (Visa, MasterCard, American Express) in order to rent. The main point to remember when renting is, if you have an accident, call the insurance company/car dealer before you answer any questions or sign any papers.

I have dealt with National and found them far more interested in telling me about the road conditions, things of which I must be aware and general information about driving in Mexico than they were in renting me a vehicle. Actually they determined it would be easier for me to take a bus. When I rented during another trip, they gave me very good service.

The telephone numbers below are for Mexico. I find it best to reserve over the Internet.

**Avis**, ☎ 800-288-8888 or 5-588-8888, www.avis.mex, has nine locations in Cancún, two in Mérida.

**Alamo**, www.alamo.com, has offices in Cancún, Mérida, Playa del Carmen and Cozumel.

**Budget**, ☎ 800-472-3325, www.budget.com, has offices in Cancún, Mérida and Cozumel.

**Dollar**, ☎ 800-800-3665, www.dollar.com, Fastlane Members, ☎ 866-776-6667, has offices in Cancún and Campeche.

**Hertz**, ☎ 800-654-3030 or 800-709-5000, www.hertz.com, has offices in Cancún, Playa del Carmen, Cozumel, Mérida and Tulum.

**National**, ☎ 800-CAR-RENT or 561-893-7470, www.nationalcar.com, has offices in Mérida and Playa del Carmen.

**Thrifty**, ☎ 918-669-2168, www.thrifty.com, has an office in Cancún.

## Hitchhiking

Mexico is not a place for hitchhiking. Although most Mexican families are friendly and willing to offer rides, there is always the opportunist who knows foreigners have money and are generally defenseless. Robbery or worse could happen. If there are no buses going where you wish to go, and there are places in the Yucatán where that could happen, go to a service station on the edge of town and wait until a family is going in your direction, then ask them for a ride. That way they can size you up and you them before you get into the vehicle. Women should not hitch when alone.



# Information Directory

## Airlines

**Aeromexico**, ☎ 800-237-6639, www.aeromexico.com

**Alaska Airlines**, ☎ 800-252-7522 or 800-468-2248 (for packages), www.alaskaair.com

**American**, ☎ 800-433-7300, www.aa.com

**America West** (US Airways), ☎ 800-235-9292, www.americawest.com

**Aviacsa**, ☎ 800-735-5396, www.aviacsa.com.mx

**British Airways** (no phone), www.britishairways.com/travel

**Continental**, ☎ 800-231-0856, www.continentalairway.com

**Delta**, ☎ 800-221-1212, www.delta.com/home/index.jsp

**Frontier** (no phone), www.frontierairline.com

**Mexicana**, ☎ 800-531-7921, www.mexicana.com

**United**, ☎ 800-241-6522, www.united.com

## Banks

**Banamex** – www.banamex.com

**Banco de Mexico** – www.banxico.org.mx

**Bancrecer** – www.bancrecer.com.mx

**Bancomext** – www.bancomext.com

**Cancomer** – www.bancomer.com.mx

**Banorte** – www.banorte.com

**Bital** – www.bital.com.mx

**Citibank Mexico** – www.citibank.com/mexico/

**Santander** – www.santander.com.mx

**Scotiabank** – www.scotiabankinverlat.com

## Car Rental Companies

**Avis**, ☎ 800-288-8888 or 5-588-8888, www.avis.mex

**Alamo**, www.alamo.com

**Budget**, ☎ 800-472-3325, www.budget.com

**Dollar**, ☎ 800-800-3665, www.dollar.com

**Hertz**, ☎ 800-654-3030 or 800-709-5000, www.hertz.com

**National**, ☎ 800-CAR-RENT or 561-893-7470, www.nationalcar.com

**Thrifty**, ☎ 918-669-2168, www.thrifty.com

## Courier Services

**Fed Ex**, www.fedex.com/us/about/unitedstates/contact

**Airborne Express**, ☎ 5-785-4280

**DHL**, www.dhl.com.mx/publish/mx/es/tools/dropoff/escri_exel.high.html **SACPAQ**, www.solunet-infomex.com/mexbdir/company.cfm?company=1562201_SACPAQ_SA_DE_CV_Mrida_yucatán

## Credit Card & Money Transfer Companies

**Visa**, ☎ 95-800-847-2399, www.visa.com

**MasterCard**, ☎ 800-424-7787, www.mastercard.com

**American Express**, ☎ 44-1273-696933, www.americanexpress.com

**Diner's Club Card**, ☎ 52-5-580-1677, www.dinersclub.com

**Money Gram**, ☎ 800-824-2220, www.moneygram.com

**Western Union**, ☎ 5-721-3080, www.westernunion.com

## Emergencies in Mexico

**Emergency**: ☎ 060 or 065

**24-hour Tourist Assistance**: ☎ 01-800-9-0392

**Tourist Legal Assistance**: ☎ 5625-8153

## Government Offices

**Mexican Ministry of the Interior**, National Institute of Migration, Ejercito Nactional #862, Col. Los Morales/Seccion Palmas, Mexico, DF, 11540, ☎ 52-55-25-81-0100, www.consulmexny.org/eng/visas_immigration.htm

## Insurance Companies

**International Insurance-Seguros**, 1047 W. Madero Mesa, AZ 85210-7635, ☎ 480-345-0191, www.seguros-insurance.net

**Global Travel Insurance**, ☎ 800-232-9415, www.globalmedicalplans.com

**Sanborn's Insurance**, Headquarters, ☎ 800-222-0158, www.sanbornsinsurance.com

**Seguros Tepeyac**, ☎ 800-837-3922, www.mapfretepeyac.com

**DriveMex.com**, ☎ 866-367-5053, www.drivemex.com

## Medical & Health Care

**IAMAT Association for Medical Assistance to Travelers**, www.iamat.org

**Cancún Hyperbaric Clinic**, Alcatraces L44, M10 SM 22, ☎ 892-7680 or 882-0274, cell 998-105-7791, hiperbarica@prodigy.net.mx

**Cozumel Clinica San Miguel**, Calle 6 #132, ☎ 987-23241, cell 49-871-9055

**Omni Puerto Aventuras Beach Resort**, Puerto Aventuras, ☎ 984-801-0127 or 806-3251, docbaldwin@prodigy.net.mx

**Star Medica Hospitals**, www.starmedica.com

**Medic Alert**, ☎ 888-633-4298 in the US or 209-668-3333 from elsewhere, www.medicalert.org

**Critical Air Ambulance**, ☎ 800-247-8326 or 800-010-0268

**Sky Med**, ☎ 800-475-9633 in US and Canada, 866-805-9624 in Mexico, www.skymed.com

**Centers for Disease Control & Prevention**, run by the US Health Department, www.cdc.gov

## Useful Websites

www.mexicomike.com

www.yucatantoday.com

www.travelyucatan.com

www.mayaruins.com

www.mexonline.com

Mundo Maya
Dzbilchaltun
Chichén Itzá
Cancún
Mérida
Uxmal
YUCATAN
Cobá
Kabah/Sayil/Labná
Tulum
Bahía de Campeche
Campeche
Muyil
N
Edzná
QUINTANA ROO
CAMPECHE
Dzibanché
Comalcalco
Kohunlich
Chetumal
TABASCO
Becan
Zpuhil
Altun Há
Villahermosa
Calakmul
El Mirador
Belize City
Palenque
Piedras Negras
Nakbe
Tikal
Belmopan
Caribbean Sea
San Yaxchilan
BELIZE
Toniná
Ceibal
Xunantunich
Bonampak
Caracol
Tuxtla-Gutiérrez
Cristóbal de las Casas
Dos Pilas
CHIAPAS
GUATEMALA
La Ceiba
Chichicastenango
Quirigua
San Pedro Sula
Guatemala City
Antigua
Copan
HONDURAS
El Baul
Tegucigalpa
Pacific Ocean
San Salvador
Tazumal
Joya de Cerem
EL SALVADOR
NOT TO SCALE
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# Maya Ruins

The newest "lingo" is to travel along "routes" in the Yucatán. Depending on your interests, you may wish to visit the most important Maya sites or the most luxurious and historic haciendas. In fact, the most efficient method of visiting specific places is already laid out for you. There is the Puuc Route (Maya ruins), the Convent Route, the Hacienda Route, the Cenote Route, the Cave Route and, in Merida, they even have a bicycle route!

Because the Yucatán *is* Maya and the old cities are accessible within hours from almost any town in the state, the ruins are second only to the beaches as major tourist attractions. Of the estimated 2,040 sites in the state, only 20 have been excavated and restored.

For convenience, some of the excavated ruins are described in this section and listed alphabetically. It is beyond the scope of this book to write about every Maya site in the Yucatán as there are hundreds, so I have chosen just a few of the more popular places, and one or two of the more impressive ones. Ruins are generally open daily from 8 am to 5 pm and entry fees are free for locals, foreign residents, children under 13 and mature adults over 60 on Sundays. Tourists have to pay.

Be aware that "guides" can be hired at many of the sites and should generally be avoided. The entry fee for most sites runs between $2 and $5,

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except for the larger sites which now cost $10. The sites that are free (and there are a few) have no services. Generally there are souvenir shops, restaurants and washrooms at the more popular sites, and kiosks selling crafts and drinks. Bathrooms are usually available at the smallest sites.

Wear good shoes and a hat. Also carry insect repellent and a bottle of water.

| MAYA PERIODS | |
|---|---|
| Pre-Classic | 1500 BC-317 AD |
| Classic | 317-889 AD |
| Post-Classic | 890-1000 AD |
| Transitional Period | 1000-Conquest |

The Puuc, or Maya Ruins, Route is a gringo trail that goes through the Sierrita de Ticul Hills to a number of Late Classic Period (600-900 AD) ruins. The major sites include Sayil and its Great Palace, Labna and its splendid archway, Kabáh and its Codz Poop Palace and Uxmal and its famous Magician's Pyramid. The easiest way to visit the major sites is to rent a car or join a tour. Otherwise you will have to spend days and days traveling to each site by 3rd-class bus.

To get to the route from Merida, take Highway 261 to Muna and follow signs to each site you wish to visit. If coming from Muna, Uxmal will be your first. If you continue to Hopelchén along the same route and you've had enough after Hopelchén you can continue to Campeche. Or you can loop north to see more minor ruins and end at Ticul or the favored Santa Elena.

Characteristic of Rio Bec-style construction are the decorative false towers on major buildings. Chenes-style architecture usually has a monster mask and the facades are covered with relief work.

## Becán

Located four miles (six km) west of Xpuhil on Highway 186 between Chetumal and Escarcega, Becán is about four hours from Tulum, so having your own vehicle and making plans for an overnighter somewhere along the way is advisable. This also allows time for a visit to Chicanna and Xpuhil ruins, both within a few miles of each other. Open from 8 am to 5 pm daily, Becán's entry fee is $3.50. Give yourself about three hours to visit the 70-acre site adequately as it is large and impressive. There are no tiendas at the entrance so bring water and mosquito repellent.

Sponsored by the Division of Historical Research of the Carnegie Institute, the first modern mapping and excavation was started in about 1934 by Karl Ruppert and John Denison. After they finished, the place lay untouched for another 35 years before scientists associated with the National Geographic Society continued excavations.

According to some sources, the name means ravine or "water formed gorge," while others claim it means "road of the serpent" and refers to the protective moat built around the city in about 200 AD. It is 12 feet (four m) deep and 45 feet (15 m) across, but parts of it were filled in at a later date when warring between groups subsided. The dirt taken from digging the ditch was used to make a protective wall. The city stands on a limestone outcropping with the main pyramid its highest point.

*Becán, Structure IV (PhilippN)*

Becán's first buildings date back to 500 BC but the people lived here as early as 2000-1000 BC. By 200 AD the city was a center of power in the Rio Bec region. By 500 AD it had grown enormously and construction peaked. Around 830 AD, the boom busted although Maya continued to live here until 1200.

Upon entering Becán, you pass between the walls of a tunnel and through an arch that leads to the main plaza, where four impressive buildings can be visited. Part of the tunnel leads to stairs that go underground before they reach the plaza. Becán was not only the political powerhouse, it was also the economic and religious capital of the area as its building suggest. The magnificent plaza has towering palaces and spectacular views. Some of the masks carved into the walls still have their original paint.

The smaller building across the plaza from the main pyramid has an upper patio with staggered blocks of stone that allow breezes to pass through. It is unknown whether this was for comfort or protection against damage during a hurricane.

Just beyond the main plaza is a second smaller one with buildings, one of which has a passage that leads under the plaza to nine small rooms. You will need a flashlight. The remains of seven different causeways lead, some believe, to seven cities that were under Becán's rule. They are very difficult to locate.

Maya believe that parrot bones carry rabies and if a dog eats them, he will die.

## Calakmul

One must have a vehicle or join a tour to get to Calakmul. It is 42 miles (70 km) off the highway, through jungle and along a narrow winding paved road. The ruins are part of the almost two million-acre **Calakmul Biosphere Reserve**. It is just 18 miles (30 km) as the crow flies from the Guatemalan border and 192 miles (320 km) from Chetumal. Once off the main

highway, there are no service stations or grocery stores so a full tank of gas and a water bottle are essential. There are no luxury accommodations once past the gate of the biosphere. The cost to enter the park is $4 per car and $3.70 to enter the ruins. This is a full-day excursion. It takes three to five hours to tour, an hour to rest, a couple of hours to check out the wildlife, and two hours driving each way. There are hundreds of exotic birds and about 160 endangered species (birds and mammals) living here, including the jaguar. A campsite, **Yaaxche**, ☎ 983-781-6064, halfway between the gate and the ruins, rents tent sites and has basic cabins for $25.

Before the entrance to the biosphere is a large hotel, **Puerta Calakmul**, www.puertacalakmul.com.mx, with rooms starting at $110. There is also a restaurant (open 6 am to 10 pm daily).

If you have the time and a car, or if you can join a tour, this UNESCO World Heritage Site is not to be missed. The thick rainforest of the biosphere is a safe haven for hundreds of large and small animals and birds that sometimes can be spotted when hiking the many groomed trails.

In 1931 while S. G. Morley was working at Chichén Itzá, Cyrus Lundell, a biologist employed by a chicle company, found the ruins of Calakmul. So impressed was he that he took detailed notes and reported the find to Morley, who in turn arranged the exploration of the ruin. Morley had Lundell name the site. After some thought, Lundell came up with the

*Calakmul, Structure I (PhilippN)*

name Calakmul – ca means two, lak means adjacent and mul means mound. The city has two adjacent pyramids.

The site remained untouched for 40 years after the initial exploration by Lundell and Morley until 1982, when William J Folan from Campeche University directed excavations. They found a number of jade funeral masks and 103 carved stele dating from 514 to 830 AD. Although only 27 square miles (70 sq km) have been mapped, 6,250 structures that include temples, plazas, tombs and residences have been identified.

During its height of power, Calacmul was an ally of Caracol in Belize and a rival of Tikal in Guatemala. Because there is a sophisticated water system, including the largest reservoir in the Yucatán, the population is believed to have reached 50,000 people. Most notable is a stele, containing a detailed, although incomplete, record of the 18 rulers of the city.

Stele 1 is best known for the story of the Snake Queen who married the ruler, Tuun K'ab Hiix. Together the King and Queen held elaborate ceremonies, including the inauguration of the city. Another famous stele shows seven captives with their hands tied behind their backs and their heads hanging down. A third carving, although not a stele, is worth noting. It is 20 feet (six meters) long and a historical document carved with the most elaborate detail. From this carving archeologists have found that the Snake Kings used the city as a strategic base for operations against those farther west and south.

As you enter the **Grand Plaza**, after following a well-marked trail from the entrance, you will be greeted by **Structure VIII**, hidden behind a forest of trees. It is one of the tallest of the ruins and the only one with a temple on top. At the foot of the staircase is a row of stele. Long ago, stairs were on all four sides of the mound (now they are only on one side) so archeologists believed this was an observatory. They have now discarded that idea but have no consensus on what it may have been. To the west is **Structure IV**, one of the oldest buildings in Calakmul, but with sections built at different times. The building is a long platform with a wide set of stairs going to a temple. To the north of Structure IV is the more modest **Structure V**, influenced by Rio Bec designs. On the west is **Structure VI**, also a modest building thought to have astronomical alignment with Structure VIII.

**Structure II** is north of the Grand Plaza and worth the 148-foot (45-meter) climb to the top (still permitted) where you can see all the way to Guatemala. The pyramid, built during the late Classic Era, has a long sloping staircase, dotted with stele at the base. The stairs at one time led to a temple on top. **Structure III** is the most complex of the buildings with 12 interlocking rooms that are topped by a roof-comb. Although most of Calakmul's architecture is influenced by the Peténstyle, this building is the first of its kind here and a pre-cursor to the Rio Bec's ornate styles.

*Calakmul, Structure II (Dragon Lost in Mexico)*

Moving from the Grand Plaza to the **Grand Acropolis**, one sees three buildings and a medium-sized ball court built in 751. Walking back toward Structure II you encounter **Structure XV**, built in 672 as a memorial to a leader known as Jaguar's Paw.

In 677, the greatest ruler of Calakmul, Yukno'm Chen II, allied with Caracol (Belize) and also won alliance with Waka by marrying his daughter. Together the three cities fought and won a battle against Tikal, the greatest Maya city of all. However, less than half a century later, Tikal again won dominance.

Venus, after the sun and moon, offers the earth the most light. Because of this, the Maya gave it many names. It was called Chak Ek, the red star, Xux Ek, the wasp star, Sastal Ek, the shining star, Nok Ek, the great star and Ahzab Kab Ek, the awakening star.

## Chacmultun

Chacmultun is located 27 miles (45 km) from Labna, near the village of Tekax and south of Oxkutzcab. From Ticul, continue southeast along Highway 184 to Tekax and turn right. Follow the signs for four miles (seven km) along a paved road to Kancab and then drive another 1.8 miles

(three km) to the site. From Chacmultun you can continue in a circle up to Loltun Caves. They are open from 8 am to 5 pm daily, and the entry fee is $3. The site is not crowded; in fact you might have the whole place to yourself and it shouldn't take more than a couple of hours to walk all the trails and see all the ruins.

*Chakmultun*

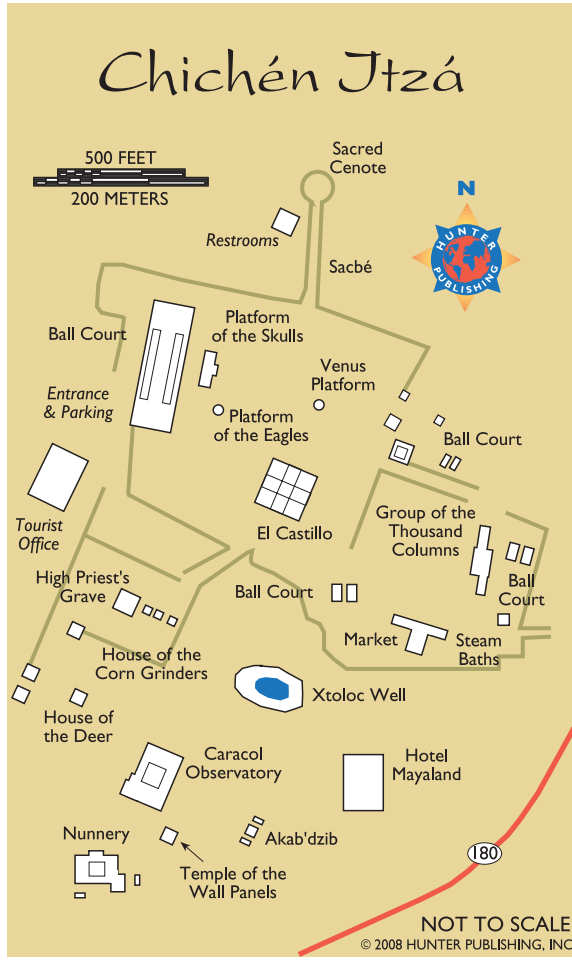
It was first discovered and explored by Teobert Maler, an adventurer born in Rome of German parents. After university he went exploring the ruins of Mexico. In 1884, after inheriting a modest estate from his father, Maler moved to the Yucatán and built a home at Ticul, close to many ruins he thought were interesting. Chacmultun was one such ruin. After Maler's death, the site lay dormant until the 1970s when it was excavated.

The city saw its peak during the Classic Period between the 3rd and 4th centuries at which time it was allied with the Petén cities in Guatemala.

Chacmultun means "place of red stones," from which the major buildings were made, but it is the scenic setting that is the real draw. Built as part of the hills, on terraces, the upper sections overlook the entire valley. The breeze (if there is one!) carries the bird songs through the branches of the old trees.

The building blocks get their color from a microorganism living in the stone that turns red when it comes in contact with air and water. This is a small ruin but it contains Puuc-style buildings with elaborate friezes and some trace paintings. There are four main groups: Chacmultun, Cabalpak, Xethpol, which has a building with some original painting still visible, and the Center, featuring a well-restored ball court. The first three are on the top of the hill and the fourth is down a bit. Seashells and obsidian were found here indicating these Maya traded with those living near the sea and volcanic mountains.

# Chichén Itzá




Chichén Itzá is 72 miles (120 km) from Merida on the Merida-Cancún Highway and 123 miles (205 km) from Cancún. Open 8 am to 5 pm, it costs $10 per person for entry. This includes the light and sound show performed each evening at 7 pm. Headphones are used to transmit the show in your choice of four languages, Spanish, English, Italian or German. Public buses (four per day from Cancún) or private tours (cost US$55-$100) visit the site daily. At the entrance is a restaurant and gift shops. Inside the ruins are numerous vendors selling souvenirs. It is advisable to go early, before the heat and crowds arrive. Visitors are no longer permitted to climb El Castillo or enter any of the buildings, except Caracol, the observatory. There are numerous moderately priced hotels in the village about 1.2 miles (two km) from the site.

Chichén Itzá was made a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2006 and one of the Seven Wonders Of The Modern World designated by the *Guinness Book of World Records* in 2007, along with the Great Wall of China, the Coliseum in Rome and the Taj Mahal in India. Although the ruins are federal property and maintained by the National Institute of Anthropology and History, the property on which the ruins stand, is owned by the Barbachano family.

At its height, between 900 and 1200 AD, Chichén Itzá was the largest political and religious center in the Yucatán. "Chi" means mouth or edge

and "ch'en" means well. Itza were the group of people living in and around the site. Itz means magic or magician and ha means water. Full translation gives us "at the mouth of the well of the water wizard."

The Itzas are believed to have migrated from Tikal in Guatemala around 415-495 AD. Others contend that they came from the Campeche area and sailed the Gulf for the purpose of trade. During their travels, they found the site, complete with a water source, so they started a community, which quickly developed into a thriving city covering an area of 25 acres.

During the 10th century Chichen was ruled by Putunes, a group of Maya merchants influenced by the Toltecs in the north.

### History

415-495 - Arrival of the Itzas and development of a community.

495-514 - Itzas occupy and rule the area.

615-692 - The Itzas abandon the city and move to Champoton in the south.

731-968 - The Itzas rule Champoton.

968-987 - The Itzas return to Chichén Itzá.

1194-1204 - Chichén Itzá is attacked and conquered by the Cocomes from the south.

1540 - The site is abandoned.



Chichén Itzá lay hidden by jungle for centuries after the Maya left. In 1841 the discovery of the city was described in a book by John Lloyd Stephens with illustrations by Frederick Catherwood. Prominent archeologists soon became intrigued. Stephen's publication especially peaked the interest of Alfred Percival Maudslay who in 1881-94 published a book called *Biology of Central America*, which specifically included descriptions of Chichén Itzá. His enthusiasm won him a knighthood, which helped escalate his interest. His scientific studies resulted in the deciphering of the numerical glyphs. This led to the discovery that every site, monument and building was dated and in some way represented mathematical concepts. For example, the stairs on the four sides of El Castillo add to 365.

During that same era (1891-94), Teobert Maler (see pages 105, 366-67) published numerous photos, which increased the fervor of study in Maya Mexico. But the land on which the ruins sit was purchased by Edward Thompson for a hacienda. He dredged the cenote and extracted bones, pottery, beads, jade and gold. The Mexican government took interest in the ruins and restoration was started around 1923 under the watchful eye of an American archeologist S.G. Morley, who was sponsored by the Carnegie Institute. It took him 17 years to complete excavations, during which time the property was sold to the Barbachano family. Most of the artifacts dredged by Thompson ended in Harvard's Museum and at the Anthropological Museum in Mexico City.

*El Castillo, Chichén Itzá (V. Lougheed)*

The ceremonial structures throughout the site are connected by paved causeways called sacbes, or white roads.

**El Castillo**, also called the Kukulcan Pyramid, is the first structure you see after entering the grounds. It has 91 stairs on each of the four sides, leading to the platform of Venus at the top. During the full moon of the spring equinox, the late afternoon sun casts shadows of isosceles triangles that form a snake, 109 feet (34 meters) long. The snake slithers down the steps and joins the head of the serpent at the bottom. The head is part of the row of stones bordering the stairs. This, in the old days, told the people when to plant. During the full moon of the autumn equinox the snake's shadow is seen gliding up the steps, and this in turn tells the people when to harvest. The acoustics at El Castillo are excellent; a priest standing at the top could speak in a soft voice and be heard in the surrounding courtyard.

The temple on top has a vaulted interior and carved wooden lintels over the doorways. Inside is a mask of Chac-Mool (Chaac-Mool) and the roof is decorated with carvings of snails. In the center of the temple is a small pyramid, used for ceremonies. Chac-Mool at one time lounged on his throne at the entrance.

Kukulcan, the bird-serpent, was the most important god at Chichén Itzá. After the Toltec tribes overran the Yucatán, Kukulcan was reborn as Quetzalcoatl. The Toltecs spread their religion throughout north and central Mexico.

*Frieze, Chichén Itzá (V. Lougheed)*

The other famous god here was Chac-Mool (Chaac-Mool), the god of rain, thunder, lightning and wind. Because he controlled harvests, he was considered very important. He also controlled the points of the compass; red represented east, black represented west, white was north and yellow was south.

Archaeologists were puzzled by inconsistencies found in dates at Chichén Itzá. Out of curiosity, they dug under El Castillo and found another perfectly intact pyramid belonging to a civilization about 1,000 years older. But, most exciting, they found a jaguar throne, carved from stone, painted red and decorated with 80 large jade discs. There was also a stone carving of Chac-Mool.

**Well of Xtoloc**, beside the trail to El Castillo, is part of the underground water system running through the limestone strata. This well supplied residents of the city with drinking water. There were a number of cisterns conveniently located around the city for storing water to be used during dry periods.

The Dresden Codex, one of four books remaining from the ancient Maya, contains a set of tables describing and predicting eclipses. The book, considered a priest's handbook, is a series of painted glyphs on bark paper whitened by lime and folded accordion style.

**Akab Dzib** is a plain building built in 869 with three sections and 18 chambers. The lack of adornment is characteristic of the Puuc style of architecture. The lintel over the south chamber has a carving of a priest with fire in front of him. Inside some chambers red handprints – early graffiti – can be seen. Next door is the **House of Deer**, so named because of a mural that once decorated one of the walls. There are three chambers inside.

Moving south from the House of Deer, the next building, the **Nunnery**, is the greatest monument of the Classic Period. It was named by Spaniards because of its many rooms. In the upper section, the frieze is adorned with masks of Chaac. The wide stairway leads to a complex with a single corridor and a door facing north. There is a temple on each side of the upper stairs with six rooms each. The north side is decorated with latticework and square figures; the south has carved flowers. The annex at the back is ornate with carvings in the Chenes style and an impressive mural. The ends of the building are decorated in latticework and the corners have masks of Chaac, as do the friezes along the front. Over the doorway is an exceptional carving of a person with a feathered headdress. The date for this building is 880 AD.

### The Signs of the Maya Zodiac can be seen on the Mural in the Annex:

| | |
|---|---|
| Sagittarius | snake |
| Aries | jaguar |
| Aquarius | bat |
| Leo | pig |
| Capricorn | parrot |
| Libra | bird |
| Gemini | owl (called the western part of Gemini) |
| Virgo | frog |
| Pisces | skeleton |
| Scorpio | turtle |
| Cancer | pig (called the eastern part of Leo) |

Next to the nunnery is the **Church**, from the Puuc period (7th-8th centuries). The walls are profusely decorated with masks of Chaac and his helpers, the armadillo, snail, turtle and crab. Inside is just one room.

**Temple of Phalluses** is located south of the nunnery and before the Temple of the Four Lintels. This is from the Classic Period and has stone sculptured phalluses sticking out of the wall over stone benches. Some believe the phalluses were used as fountains to dispense water. This building is not always open to the public.

**Temple of the Three Lintels** from the Classic Period is a rectangular building with three chambers, built in 850. The upper sections are decorated with latticework and masks of Chaac. The **Temple of the Four Lintels** is close by and is basically rubble. It was built in 889.

*Observatory, Chichén Itzá (V. Lougheed)*

**Caracol, the Observatory**, built in the Transitional Period, 1000 AD to 1500 is, for me, the most impressive of all the buildings at Chichén Itzá. The study of astronomy allowed the Maya to perfect their calendar and predict astrological events. The upper section of the three platforms is over 4,080 sq yards (3,400 sq m) in size and 19 feet (six m) high. The stair balustrades are decorated with snakes and lead to the observation chamber, a small room that faced west so the summer solstice could be clearly observed. Narrow slits in the walls allowed the sun to hit a specific spot in the center of the building twice a year. This was the Maya clock.

**Chichanchob or Red House**, across from the observatory, is so named because of the red border along the portico. The house is on a raised foundation with rounded corners and a west-facing staircase. The glyphs indicate that it was built in 870 AD. The upper temple has classic Maya vaulting, stone lintels over the doors and a mask of Chaac above the lintel of the main door.

The **Cenote** is a natural well located 960 feet (300 meters) south of El Castillo. Dedicated to Chaac, it was a sacred pilgrimage site and has man-made platforms from where the public could watch ceremonies. The water level is 70 feet (22 meters) below the rim and 42-64 feet (13-20 meters) deep. The green color is attributed to algae.

Rumors spread by the earliest colonizers claimed that humans were sacrificed in the cenote to appease the gods. Other rumors told of huge snakes killing anyone entering the waters. It was these stories that most fascinated Thompson, who purchased the ruins in the 1920s. With diving gear and a friend, he dredged the cenote and, although he found some treasures, he recovered only one skeleton, hardly enough to appease any gods. Other sources say there were up to 50 skeletons found, mostly of children and men rather than beautiful virgins. On one occasion, while underwater, Thompson felt a slimy muscular object pushing him down. His heart sank with fear of the legendary snake, but after his friend helped free him from the "snake" they found it was an old tree trunk.

*Ball court, Chichén-Itzá (V. Lougheed)*

Items pulled from the waters included gold bells, plaques and beads of jade. There were also mirrors, rings, copper sandals, copal gum, vessels, pots and arrowheads. Some items were brought from places as far away as Panama before being offered to the gods haunting the cenote.

**Temple of Warriors** just east of the pyramid is a three-tiered building with stairs. The upper level has square pillars decorated with plumed snakes. They are guarding Chac-Mool sitting in front. Extensive excavation revealed a smaller temple of Chac-Mool inside this one. The cornice near the top of the temple is decorated with warriors, jaguars and eagles eating human hearts. Inside is a carving of Kukulcan and other important rulers/priests. A vaulted roof covers this temple and the exterior walls have carvings from both Maya and Toltec groups but the lower parts of the décor indicate Puuc-style masks of Chaac. Beside the temple are the **Thousand Columns**, some of which are carved. This area may have been a market place or an assembly hall.

*The Thousand Columns, Chichén Itzá (V. Lougheed)*

**Ball Court** with the **Temple of Jaguars** on its east side is one of seven found at the site, although some sources claim there are 13, with this court being the largest in the Americas. This is where the games were played and religious ceremonies were held afterward. The sidewalls run 467 feet (146 m) and in the center of each wall is a stone ring with a serpent's head carved on top. The circle was the goal into which a rubber ball was to be hit by the player's elbow,

*Tzompantli skulls, Chichén-Itzá* (V. Lougheed)



knee or hip. The losers really lost in this game as they were sacrificed to the gods. There are carvings along the base of the walls showing players in full regalia. The first player is kneeling, decapitated and blood in the form of snakes is gushing from his body. Across from the dead player is the captain of the winning team holding his opponent's head. The stairway near the carvings leads to the Temple of Jaguars where the façade is decorated mostly with jaguars, but the detail is the best example of Maya carving in the Yucatán. Inside and just barely visible is a mural depicting a battle between Maya and Toltec. Outside the ball court is the annex to the Jaguar Temple with numerous jaguar carvings.

**Tzompantli** is a flat platform covered in carvings of skulls impaled on stakes and eagles devouring hearts. It is interesting to see that even as skulls, each face is different. Human skulls and two Chac-Mools (Chaac-Mools) were found here when the structure was excavated.

The Tzolkin or Ritual calendar of the Maya had 260 days, the Haab or Civil calendar had 365 days, the Calendar Round had 819 days and the Era calendar was 18,980 days.

## Cobá

Cobá is 28 miles (45 km) north of Tulum and about 56 miles (90 km) east of Chichén Itzá. It's accessible by public transportation or private tour. Open

8 am to 5 pm daily, the entry fee is $4.50 and official guides are available (check for his government photo ID, as there are some guides not licensed and therefore not fully qualified). Parking is $1.50. Bike rentals are available for $3 per hour.

In the village of Cobá, there are a couple of small hotels, restaurants and souvenir shops.

Located on the shores of five of the largest lakes in the Yucatán, Lake Cobá, Macanxoc, Xkanha, Zacalpuc and Sina A Kal, Cobá covers 27 sq miles (70 sq km) of jungle. However, most of the ruins of interest to amateur archaeologists are on Lake Cobá and Macanxoc. Besides the ruins, you may swim in the lake and see some of the wildlife hiding in the surrounding jungle.

First visited by Catherwood and Stephens in the mid-1800s, these isolated ruins were left to the jungle because they were difficult to get to. Teobert Maler in 1891 began excavations, but it wasn't until Eric Thompson and Harry Pollock from the Carnegie Institute came in 1926 that finds were added to those of Maler. Thomas Gann, an amateur archaeologist who learned about the ruins from Maya hunters, brought it to the attention of Thompson and Pollock. Although the Mexican government became involved in promoting excavation after Cancún was established, only a few buildings have been restored.

The name means "ruffled waters." It is an unusual site due to the clustering of buildings near a chain of lakes that obviously provided drinking water. Cobá is the only Maya city found so far that shows evidence of harnessing lake water for drinking and agriculture. They built dykes around the lake so it was like a huge holding tank. Most people in the Yucatán and the Peténcollected rainwater and stored it in cisterns.

*Grand Pyramid, Cobá*

There is also evidence of an agricultural society being present about 850 BC. Their cornfields were planted inland and it is assumed the water was piped or hauled in from Lake Cobá. An enemy of Chichén Itzá, Cobá fell from power along with its ally city Yaxuna by around 860 AD. A few hundred years later, new buildings were added but Cobá never regained its prominence as a ruling power.

The Petén-styled pyramids are joined by over 49 miles (80 km) of cobbled roads radiating out from the center plaza. One group of buildings passed is at the former city of Yaxuna, 100 miles away. The roads were built between 600 and 800 AD and were used for military purposes, trading and religious ceremonies.

**Grand Pyramid** or Nohoch Mul has 120 stairs, in poor repair, leading to the temple on top. The structure towers about 140 feet (44 meters) above the surrounding jungle and is the highest pyramid in the Maya Riviera. Although the pyramid is similar in design to Peténarchitectural style, the corner stones are rounded like those from Uxmal or Piedras Negras. Nohoch Mul has carved stairs, which can be climbed using a chain banister. Another good example of the rounded corners is found at the **Crossroads Temple**. The stairs on this temple are virtually nonexistent after the first level. The stones used to form the pyramid are not carved or rounded. The **ball court** is near-identical to that at Tikal with a raised platform but it is like no other in the Yucatan. More than 20 stele have been uncovered here. There is also an observatory and numerous smaller temples.

## Dzibilchaltun

Dzibilchaltun is 9.3 miles (15 km) north of Merida and accessible by public bus. Open daily from 8 am to 5 pm, the entrance fee is $6 and includes entry to the museum, which has an excellent collection artfully displayed. Parking is $1. The museum and cenote are open daily except Monday until 4 pm. During the spring and fall equinox, the ruins open at 5:30 am. There are souvenir shops and a small restaurant at the entrance.

Difficult to pronounce (dzee-beel-chal-toon), the name means "where there is writing on stones." The site has been continuously occupied since 300 BC until Spanish occupation, making it the longest-occupied city in the Yucatán. It covered about six sq miles (16 sq km) of land and was connected to other sites by cobbled roads. Because of its proximity to the ocean, it traded almost exclusively in salt and fish. During its height about AD 800, there were 25,000 residents and 25 major monuments (administration buildings, palaces and plazas) were erected.

To get there, if driving, take the road to Progreso and about five miles (eight km) from Merida turn at a sign pointing to the ruin. It is another 3.1 miles (five km) from the turnoff. If going by bus, catch the direct one from San Juan Park on Calle 69, between Av 62 and 64. Or from Progreso, take a bus from the station on Calle 62, #524 between Ave 65 and 67.

*Temple of the Seven Dolls*

The site was made a national park in 1987 to protect the plants and animals from encroaching development. Some of the more popular animals are the opossum and armadillo. There are over 30 species of birds, some, like the Altamira oriole are endemic.

Restoration and excavation is on going. There are over 8,000 structures, most unexcavated, that at one time housed and serviced about 40,000 people. Almost every grass-covered mound standing higher than an ant hill is a ruin.

**Temple of the Seven Dolls** is so called because of the seven clay, oven-baked figurines, just seven centimeters high, that were found under the ruins of a newer temple. Replicas of the dolls are in the museum. The present temple is situated so that during the spring and fall equinox, at sunrise, the sun shines directly through the two doors as seen in all the advertising photos of this site. The building, with its tower worn like a bowler hat, is impressive, although not overly ornate. It was constructed using mortar with chocks (wedges or support pieces) to keep the stones from slipping. This temple is the only one in the Yucatán with windows and a tower rather than a roof comb. In front of the temple is a huge monolithic stele, also on a small pyramid. It is believed that the ruling class acted as intermediaries between the sun god and the working people.

The Temple is most impressive but the natural surroundings and wildlife add to the visit. There are more than 200 species of plants and many along the causeways are labeled. The cenote, open for swimming, is partly covered in lily pads and is sur-

*Xlacah Cenote*

rounded on two sides by lush jungle. The chapel, built in the middle of the site by the first Spaniards that arrived, is an odd contrast.

**Xlacah Cenote** is now used by locals for swimming but at one time supplied the city with drinking water, even though the water has high calcium content, making it quite hard. The word Xlacah means "old town." The cenote, one of the largest in the Yucatán, is about 144 feet (45 m) deep with a large gallery that spreads out horizontally at the bottom. Three types of fish are found in the cenote. One, a species of sardine, is endemic to the Yucatán.

Willys Andres from University of Tulane first excavated the cenote and found ceramic shards from shattered water urns, and numerous household items made from wood, stone and bone, but no virgins. Close to the cenote, in the central plaza, are the remains of the **Franciscan church** built between 1590 and 1600 with stones taken from the ruins.

**Structure 38 Group** is significant because of the square basins found in these residences. Just south of the residences are attached dwellings. The platform, under which a tomb was discovered, is about 162 sq yards (135 sq m). It holds 35 separate dwellings. Nearby is the **Standing Temple**, found in 1942. It was the only one with a roof intact. Built about 825, it has features from the Puuc style, such as a door lintel made from a single carved block of wood.

Maya were fascinated with astronomy and mathematics. In their calculations they measured the sun's cycle with a margin of error of 17.28 seconds every year, the moon's cycle with an error of 23.328 seconds each year and the cycle of Venus with an error of one day every 6,000 years.

There is a small museum here with artifacts dating back to 500 BC. The re-constructed Maya huts, inside the museum, are interesting to view.

## Edzna

Edzna is just 36 miles (60 km) southeast of Campeche along Highway 180. This is a well excavated, 80-sq-mile (206-sq-km) site with 20 interesting buildings that takes a few hours to visit. Some of the ruins can be climbed, offering magnificent vistas of the surrounding jungle. Open from 8 am to 5 pm daily, the entrance fee is $3.70. There is an information booth and a small souvenir shop selling, among other things, water. They put on a light show on Friday and Saturday nights, for about $12 per person. Call ☎ 81-192-55 or 81-192-29 to make reservations. There must be 50 people or more for the show to commence and it will be cancelled by 6 pm if there aren't enough. The closest village with a hotel is Xpujil.

No one knows the meaning of the name but guesses are the "house of Itzaes" (a Maya group), the "house of echoes" or the "house of gestures."

Although first rediscovered in 1906, it wasn't until recently that restoration and excavation began.

In its early days, about 400 BC, the site was a small farming community that blossomed during the classic period until around 900 AD, when it became a large city and part of the Calakmul political group. Edzna's most impressive achievements, besides the imposing Five-Story Temple, are the reservoirs, canals and cisterns that ran between all the plazas and buildings for a total of 3.6 miles (six km) and supplied the 20,000 residents with water.

The **Ambassidor's Patio** is at the end of the path that winds through the jungle to a small plaza, named after a group of ambassadors who donated funds that helped pay for excavations. It looks like a wheel of fortune. The platform with the building that contains vaulted rooms, on the east side of the plaza, is the **Platform of Knives**, so named because of the large number of flint blades found here. Reconstruction of this site was done by Guatemalan refugees.

The **South Temple** is on the Old Plaza and built in the Petén architectural style. The interesting feature of this building is the sloped ramp (rather than stairs) that reaches the upper temple. Beside the South Temple is a rather large ball court that has just one remaining ball ring. On the opposite side of the plaza is the **Mask Temple**, with carvings from the earliest days, one of the sun god with dental mutilations and huge ear rings. These were thought to indicate beauty. On the east side of the old plaza is the **Temple of the Decorated Stairs**, an easily identifiable structure.

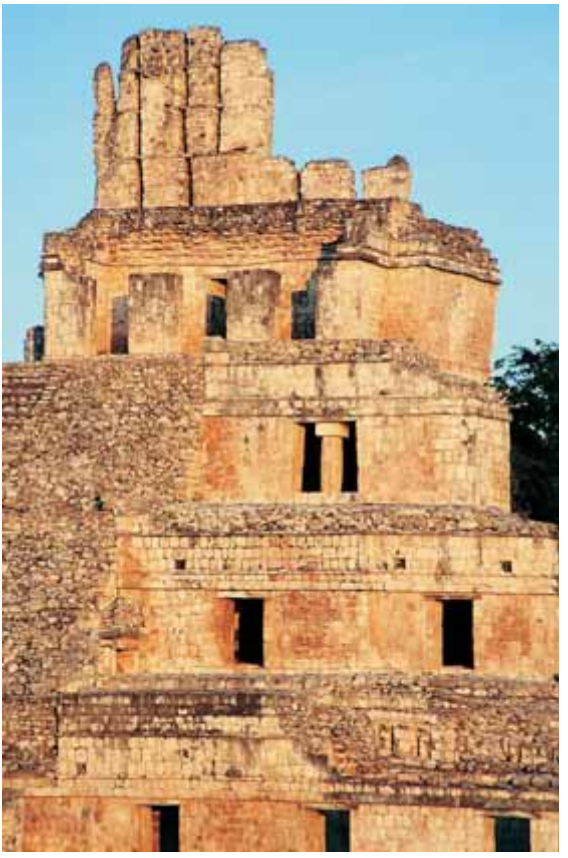
**Grand Acropolis** is farther along the marked pathway and has a square platform 512 feet (160 m) wide and 25 feet (eight m) high. A ritual steam bath is located beside a set of columns near the grand acropolis.

*Grand Acropolis, Edzna (El Ágora)*

**Five Story Temple**, an impressive five-story pyramid flanking the south side of the plaza, is 112 feet (35 m) high, with an additional three-room temple on top that is crowned with an intact roof comb. It is the highlight of the city. Each level, different in design from the next, has rooms with large doorways and the doors on the fourth level are divided by carved columns. Opposite the Five Stories is the **North Temple**, which is similar in size and design to the **House of**

**the Moon** located on the western side of the plaza that has an intact stairway but a ruined temple on top.

There are two columns in the main plaza that are completely shadowed when the sun shines directly overhead. Archeologists speculate that the Maya calendar was amended by those living here because the overhead sun occurred 18 days before the date established by their predecessors and the day traditionally celebrated as the New Year. Those at Edzna, in 671, made such a strong argument for change that other cities followed suit and changed their calendars accordingly.



*Five Story Temple, Edzna*

The oldest structure is at the very farthest reaches of the city. It is the **Pyramid of the Old Witch**, a five-tiered structure that has not been excavated or restored. The walk, with the tropical birds and plants seen along the way, is every bit as good as the ruin itself.

## EkBalam

EkBalam is 115 miles (185 km) east of Merida along Highway 295 and 18 miles (30 km) north of Valladolid, 43 miles (70 km) from Chichén Itzá and 1.2 miles (two km) from the village of Ek Balam. Open from 8 am to 5 pm, the entrance fees are $4. There is a washroom and free parking available. The entrance to the tomb at the tower is worth the trip here. English signs offer information about each important ruin at the site, but guides too can be hired. It takes a minimum of one hour to visit but two are recommended.

*Carvings at EkBalam*

First discovered by Desirée Charney in 1886, it wasn't until 1927 that Morley reported the importance of the ruin. Studies and excavations by Leticia Vargas de la Peña and Victor R. Castillo from the National Institute of Anthropology and History are currently being conducted.

A rich agricultural community occupied the area from about 100 BC until the Spanish conquest. Its height of power was between 400 and 900 AD. The city covers 4½ sq miles (11½ sq km) and was founded by Lord Ek Balam, who successfully governed for 40 years. Ek Balam reached its height of power around 800 AD. This date corresponds with carbon testing of the wooden lintel over a doorway that was also carved during this period. The translated name is "black jaguar." Recent evidence indicates bloodletting ceremonies were practiced here.

A causeway from the official entrance leads to a freestanding arched entrance on a raised platform. The arch was closed off for a period of time but the altar flanking the side suggests visitors left offerings before going to the main plaza. A wall surrounds three sides of the city and, although not high enough for defense purposes, it may have been used to hold back spectators during religious ceremonial events.

The **central plaza**, encompassing 310 of the city's 2,800 acres, has three huge ceremonial structures, which makes the center exceptional. The chief pyramid on the north, called **the tower** is 100 feet (31 m) high, 517

(171 m) long and 200 feet (62 m) wide. Its inner section, built a significant 52 years earlier than the tower, contains the tomb of Ukit Kan Lek Tok, who built most of the central plaza. Ascending the stairs, you are greeted midway by two snakeheads with oversized tongues decorated in almost identical carved glyphs. It is rare to see matching glyphs in Maya carvings.

The carvings at the entrance to the tomb include a 15-foot-high (4.7-m) jaguar with open mouth. There are winged warriors with skulls on their belts off to the side. The original hieroglyphs on the window frame at the **Jaguar's altar** are well preserved, as are the surrounding stucco carvings, some of peaceful meditative figures, others of warriors. Inside is a remarkable bench with carvings on its legs. The stairs going to the top have been reconstructed and work is ongoing. Stairs going into the lower rooms can also be navigated (with care!).

Just beyond the plaza is a moderately sized ball court. Recently, archeologists found a painted frieze and some burnt stone balls that may have been part of the ball game played here.

The circular building directly across the plaza is the **Oval Palace** (rather than an observatory). This huge stone monument has a ceremonial platform in front and a temple on top. Entrance to the building is at ground level.

Two identical moderate-sized pyramids, called the twins, are on platforms at the southwest end. In front is a magnificent stele, probably carved in honor of Ukit Jol Ahkul, an early ruler. He's wearing an elaborate headdress and holds a scepter in his hand. The two large buildings at the east and west sides of the plaza are the second- and third-largest here. Some of the stone sculptures on small altars and steles are exceptional in detail. They can be found around the entire site.

*The Twins, EkBalam*

# El Rey Ruins

The ruins, in Cancún, are open from 8 am to 5 pm, and cost $3 to enter. They are on the lagoon side at KM 17 along the hotel zone (Blvd. Kukulcan) and next to the Hilton Resort Golf Course. Take any R-1 bus heading south, away from the center. The site does not require more than an hour to tour unless you spend too much time playing with the hundreds of iguanas that live here.

El Rey, honoring the Sun God, Mak'inah (Great Sun), is a minor site that was occupied from 900 AD until the conquest. Although its ancient name is unknown, El Rey, meaning "the king," was chosen because a ceremonial mask, a sculpture and a skull were found at the site. Those living here earned their living by fishing, farming and trading.

According to the Dresden Codex, to identify the oldest Maya god, the Sun God in carvings, look for a face with squinting eyes and a filed tooth sticking out of his mouth that looks, at first glance, like a tongue.

There are two platforms with numerous columns that once held palapa roofs. These structures formed temples that were used for religious ceremonies. In front of the temples were markets. One set of columns has a large stone lintel and across from it is part of a stone building. Some glyphs and a mural can be seen.

### Maya Calendar

Long Count . . time since creation, August 11th, 3114 BC, which translates to June 18th, 751 AD in the Gregorian calendar.

K'in . . . . . one day
Winal . . . . . 20 days or one month
Tun . . . . . 360 days or one long count year
Katun . . . . . 7,200 days or 20 tun
Baktun . . . . . 144,000 days or 20 katun

# Izamal

The city of Izamal on the Convent Route is east of Merida and has remains of an old Maya city within its borders. See information on page 337 for the modern city. Buses from Merida, on Calle 50, between 65 and 67, leave every half hour and cost $2.40. It takes about 45 minutes by car and 1.5 hours by bus. Although there is an entry fee charged for each of the pyramids, usually an attendant isn't around until the tour buses appear.

The name means "yellow city." The first dwellers started farming near here around 750 to 200 BC but its height of power was between 600 and 800 AD, after which Chichén Itzá came to dominate.

*Izamal*

The god of creation, Itzamna, and the sun god, Kinich Ahau, were the most revered here and pilgrimages to the region continued for centuries after the city was subdued. The impressive **Kinich Kakmo Pyramid** is reached by walking north on Calle 27 to the "Zona Arqueologica" sign pointing between two large buildings. **Itzamatul Pyramid** is just three blocks south of Parque Cinco de Mayo and Parque Itzamna. **Habuc Pyramid** is on Calle 24, between 35 and 37 and across from the convent, and **Kabul** is just a block from either of the parks. **Conejo**, on Calle 22 between 31 and 33, is a small insignificant mound.

The 10-level pyramid, **Kinich Kakmo** is 112 feet (35 m) high and required almost a million cubic meters of rock and mud for its 640-by-576-foot (200-by-180-m) base. It is crowned with a temple. At the **Kabul** pyramid, an impressive stucco mask was on one wall and drawn by Catherwood back in the 1800s but, like many Maya artifacts, the mask has disappeared. Entrance to the museum includes a ticket to Kabul. **Itzamana** is dedicated to the god of creation and also has a massive base. **Habuc Pyramid's** structure has rounded corners built over the earlier construction using square corners.



## Kabáh

Kabáh is probably the most spectacular of the smaller sites on the Puuc Route. To get here, follow Highway 261 toward Campeche for 87 miles (140 km) from Merida and then follow the signs. Open from 8 am to 5 pm, it has an entry fee of $5. The highway passes through the city center.

The site has been "enthusiastically" rebuilt. Using newly carved stones to replace the missing ones makes the 1,000-year-old building look like a new antique.

Kabáh means "strong hand" or " royal snake in the hand." Settlement began about 300 BC but its height of power was between 800 and 1000 AD. Located 11 miles (18 km) south of Uxmal, the two sites are joined by a raised causeway, 16 feet (five m) wide with arched gates at each end.

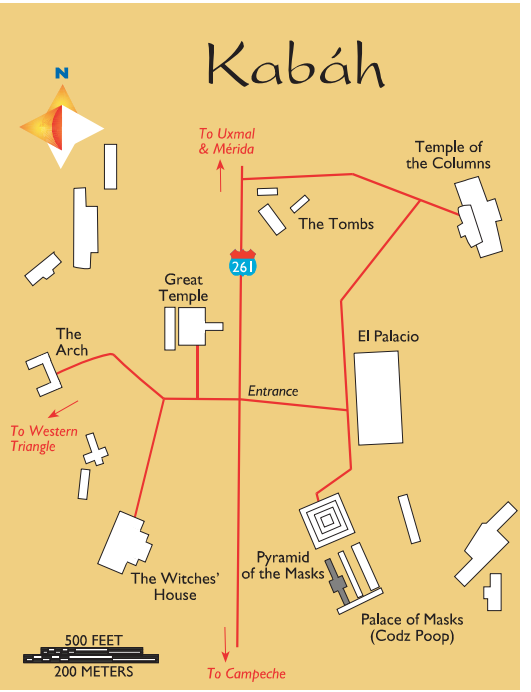
**Palace of the Masks**, as the name suggests, is decorated with 250 Chaac masks, each one built using 30 blocks of cut stone. Often called the Codz

*Kabáh (V. Lougheed)*

Poop or rolled matting, it is the repetition of the mask that makes the palace so unusual. Usually the Puuc style was to have a plain lower level topped with an ornate upper frieze. Here, the west wall is entirely covered with carved masks and some of the long curved noses of Chaac are still in place. Copal incense was found in a few of the noses. At the west side of the building are good examples of a corbel vault and on the east are huge carvings of uniformed warriors. The building stands on a 16-foot (five-m) platform, in front of which is a circular cistern.

**Temple of Columns** is off the main plaza and surrounded by jungle. Although not fully excavated, the temple gets its name from the hundreds of columns that decorate or form the frieze and upper sections of the outside wall. These same columns are between the entrances.

**Arch of Kabáh** is on the opposite side of the road and down a trail. Although the arch is not exceptional, the walk to it is a draw for birders.




## Labna

Labna is 15 miles (24 km) southeast of Uxmal on the Puuc Route and about an hour from Merida along the main highway. It is also just three miles (five km) south of Kabáh. From Cancún Labna is more difficult to reach as there are no main highways after Valladolid leading directly to the Puuc Route. One should turn south at Holca off Highway 180 and continue on to Ticul then Santa Elena, near Kabáh.

Open from 8 am to 5 pm daily, entry fee to the ruin is $2. Labna is a quiet but well kept site although not totally excavated. Give yourself one to two hours to visit.

The name means "old houses" in Maya. During the height of Labna's reign, between 600 and 900 AD, they built a magnificent arch, which today is the city's main attraction. Although it is a small site, about 500 acres, it is one of the more interesting because of its accessible semi-hidden stairways.

**El Palacio** is a two-level structure containing many vaulted rooms and stone columns. Some 445 feet (139 m) long, with a 170-foot (53-m) terrace, it is the longest Puuc building yet discovered. Chaac, the god of interest here, is found carved on many corners and cornices. However, an unusual interpretation of Chaac can be seen near the southeast corner. His nose is curled up over his head and is ejecting a human from his wide-open mouth. Although Maya priests were apparently brutal during human sacrifices, the Maya artists seem to have had a sense of humor. The palace dominates the plaza. A ceremonial walkway leads away from the center.

*El Palacio, Labna* (V. Lougheed)

Standing on a ruined pyramid, **El Mirador** has a one-room temple with an intact roof-comb made of open lattice-work, probably to decrease wind resistance during storms. The interior of the temple is vaulted with a corbelled arch. According to Stephens, there was once a seated figure at the temple; now only half a figure can be seen on one corner. El Mirador towers over

*Labna arch* (Régis Lachaume)

the entrance arch and dominates the entire site. John Stephens found El Mirador in 1840. The temple was filled with statues of ball players. However, the statues, like many other Maya artifacts, are either in private collections now or have been destroyed.

**The Arch** is a masterpiece of corbel-style work with fine Puuc latticework. It stands 42 feet (13 m) wide and 20 feet (6.2 m) high. The pinnacle once had a roof-comb similar to that on El Mirador but has recently disintegrated. The rooms at the sides are sentry posts. The arch is on the causeway between Labna and Uxmal, just 15 miles (24 km) away. The city's 60 cisterns once supplied a fairly large population with water.

## Mayapan

Mayapan, a miniature Chichén Itzá, is 27 miles (43 km) from Merida and 12 miles (20 km) south of Acanceh along Highway 180. The site is part of the Convent Route and is easiest to visit with a tour or by driving. Open from 8 am to 5 pm, with an entry fee of $4. Parking is free. One of the draws of Mayapan is the lack of tourists and the constantly encroaching jungle that still hides many of the town's treasures. It should take about two hours to visit.

*Mayapan (mediomundo)*

First explored in the 1940s and 1950s by H.E. Pollock and Tatiana Proskouriakoff, the exploration was sponsored by the Carnegie Institute. After this initial interest, the site was left until recently when a team from the University of Albany began research.

Mayapan means "banner of the Maya." The city was founded by the Chichén Itzá ruler, Kukulkan II, around 1263 (some sources say 1221) and after the defeat of Chichén Itzá by Hunac Ceel. After Kukulkan's death, the city was taken over by the Cocom family who ruled most of Northern Yucatán until the Spanish arrived.

The architectural design is strongly influenced by Chichén Itzá and a smaller replica of the Kukulcan Pyramid is on the main plaza. This structure's base has painted murals, one of which is quite clear.

Besides the pyramid, an observatory and a house of columns are on the main plaza and these are also comparable to those at Chichén Itzá. The round tower has four doors and is akin to those built by the worshipers of

the wind god, Ehecatl. Unusual for most Maya cities, the main plaza was surrounded by a protective wall. At one time the city center housed administrative buildings, temples, altars and homes for about 2,000 people. Most notable are the large number of personal altars and private temples that have led archeologists to believe that population density was about 7,700 persons per sq mile (3,000 per sq km).

Outside the main plaza are more observatories and private altars. A high-relief mask of Chaac is well worth seeking out.

## Oxkintok

Oxkintok is about 36 miles (60 km) from Merida at the intersection of Highway 184 and 188 in the Puuc Hills and could be a side trip if doing the Puuc Route. Open from 8 am to 5 pm, it has an entry fee of $3 and parking is free. There are no shops or restaurants. Excavations are on-going.

*Carved column, Oxkintok (Chunchucmil)*

The word Oxkintok is divided into three words; Ox means three, kin means daytime and tok can mean to defend/burn, to puncture or chert, which is a hard, sedimentary rock, often with a glossy appearance. Putting some of that together, it could mean burned in three days, punctured with chert.

Inhabited by Maya since 300 BC, this is one of the oldest sites in the Yucatán. The most recent date is 859, inscribed on a monument near the center. There are numerous unnamed buildings, some partly reconstructed, some just mounds on the ground. Oxkintok is quiet and well maintained.

**Chich Palace** has 10 rooms, with some of its exquisitely carved columns still standing. A tomb containing a jade mask and paintings on the floor indicate an important lord was buried here.

**Tzat Tun Tzat Building** has a number of tunnels, passages and stairs that, because of the placement of the windows, need no artificial light. The name means a "place where one may get lost" or "labyrinth" – and it's fun

to explore while speculating on the purpose it served. The deeper into the building you go, the more golden the light appears. The building is on three levels representing hell, heaven and earth. Some scientists believe the small orifices in the walls were used as sundials.

## Sayil

On the Puuc Route and part of the World Heritage Site, Sayil is on Highway 261, a paved narrow road 73 miles (118 km) from Merida and eight miles (13 km) from X'lapak. Open from 8 am to 5 pm, it has an entry fee of $2.50. Parking is free. There are washrooms and a small outdoor museum. Covering about 1½ sq miles (4½ sq km), the site will take a couple of hours to explore.

*Palace, Sayil* (V. Lougheed)

Mapping was started by J.A. Sabloff in 1983 and completed in 1988, after which he teamed up with G. Tourtellot and started excavations. They have mapped about 2,500 mounds that include platforms, houses, a ball court and terraces, but most have not been excavated. Sabloff, interested in looking at the social structure of the Maya, studied the outlying farmland and field terracing more than the buildings of the ruling classes.

The name means "place of the ants." Archeologists have calculated, from the number of cisterns built, that there were about 17,000 people living here during their height of power in the eighth century. Sabloff also noted that a ring of dwellings beyond the main plaza had two or three houses per group and each had a cistern. These dwellings thinned the farther from the center Sabloff explored. Terraced fields started where the dwellings stopped.

The main **palace**, built in different phases between 670 and 1000, is a three-tiered building, 233 feet (72 m) long. It has a well-restored central staircase leading to 90 rooms that could sleep 350 people. At the top is a roof terrace, not usually seen in Mayaland. Behind the palace is a large cistern.

**El Mirador** is a small pyramid with a roof-combed temple just 1¼ mile (two km) along the trail. Often called the watchtower because of its strategic position on a small knoll, El Mirador looks like it was partly built into the hill. The roof comb is still mostly intact.

Although the friezes at Sayil are not spectacular, some steles are worth seeking out. There is one, called Yum Keep or the phallic stele, that looks like a man with huge genitals – it's actually a fertility god and is located under the protection of a thatch roof.

## Tulum

Tulum is 74 miles (120 km) south of Cancún and, if you are taking public transportation, 1¼ miles (two km) off the highway from where the bus stops. There are first- and second-class buses daily until six at night. Tours are abundant and private taxis will take you from any center between Cancún and Chetumal. A parking lot is located at the ruins and cabañas can be found 1¼ miles (two km) south of the ruins. There are hotels in town.

Open from 8 am to 5 pm daily, the entry fee is $5. There is a food vendor and public toilets at the entrance. Because of its magnificent setting this has become the third-most popular ruin in Mexico. **El Castillo**, the largest building, is perched on the edge of a 38-foot (12-m) cliff overlooking the azure waters of the Caribbean. A stairway allows access to Boca Pela beach directly below El Castillo.

Tulum, first called Zama by the Maya, means either City of Dawn (possibly because it faces the rising sun) or fence/wall (perhaps because the grounds, 1,216 feet/380 m long by 528 feet/165 m wide, are surrounded by a stone wall 10-15 feet/three to five m high and 19 feet/six m thick). There are a total of five entrances. Two sections, about 38 feet/12 m wide and at the very north and south ends of the city, have no wall. About half a kilometer north of the wall, are some small single-room temples believed to service those living beyond the city center. The main entrance is through an arch of stone constructed during the early days of the Classic Period. Guard towers are located on the northwest and southwest corners of the wall and the East Entrance is a corbel arch tunnel. This is where most visitors exit.

Carving on a stele indicates that people lived here as early as 433 AD. The city was a trading center from the early days but its economic height was reached during the post-classic period (890-1000). Maya continued to worship at the temples until recently.

The site was first mentioned by Juan Diaz in 1518; he spotted it while sailing along the coast. He compared it to Seville, Spain. In 1579 Juan de

*El Castillo, Tulum* (PhilippN)

Reigosa wrote of stone buildings he'd seen along the coast. Pedro Sanchez de Aguilar later wrote of 10 shipwrecked sailors who were taken prisoner at Zama (now Tulum). One, Geronimo de Aguilar, eventually became interpreter for Hernando Cortéz. In the mid-1800s, Stephens and Catherwood visited and described Tulum in their book. Finally, the ruins gave sanctuary to the Talking Cross Maya and to those fighting during the Caste Wars.

Burials, for the most part, were not performed at Tulum. Rather, relatives, high priests and the heir of the estate accompanied the deceased down to Jaina (Campeche) in a canoe. Along the way, the priest would sing and pray for the deceased person's soul. The funeral party was always decked out in their best headdresses and robes made of brightly colored feathers.

**El Castillo** is the predominant building at the site. The palace is perched on a natural pyramid (rather than a constructed one), which is a cliff high above the Caribbean. It flanks the western side of the plaza. El Castillo was built as two structures, one on the other. The lower one has two rooms, an outside stairway and primitive stone roofs. The original portico, overlooking the water, was covered by an altar decorated with two plumed-serpent masks. The two ends of this building are from the oldest times of the city. The upper section, built in a style unique to Tulum, has doorjambs that lean inward, although the walls lean outward. At the entrance to the temple are three niches; the center has a carved "Descending God" and the end has a statue of a ruler, while the third niche is now empty. The ornament is undoubtedly decorating some private collector's mantle. Directly in front of El Castillo is a small square

structure believed to have been used during ceremonies at the winter and summer solstices.

**Temple of the Frescoes**, originally an observatory, lies directly west of El Castillo. Because of its frescoes that cover three of the exterior walls, it is the most outstanding temple here. These frescoes are about 25 feet (eight m) long and less than three feet (one m) high. Inside, painted images, mostly of the god Itzamna and the moon goddess Ix-Chel in ceremonial dress, are still visible on the walls. The murals throughout the buildings are painted in red, blue and yellow with black outlines portraying figures influenced by Mixtec and Central Mexican cultures. The red and blue colors were painted with a round brush, indicating to archeologists that an advanced technique was used.

*Temple of the Frescoes, Tulum (Sonja H)*

**Temple of the Descending God**, sitting directly northwest of El Castillo, represents the day's end or, for some, the falling rain and, for others, lightning. This too is a temple built on top of another. The cornice over the western doorway is in three sections, which contain the carving of the winged Descending God (use your imagination!). On the south wall of the main room is a snake adorned in ceremonial dress. Inside, the frescoes show a ruler dressed in sandals holding a shield made of seashells. His arms and neck are adorned with jewelry and his hip holds four hanging figures. Also unusual are two benches along the sides and a small window at the back.

**House of the Halach Uinik** or Primary Lord has a row of columns that once supported a thatch roof. At the back of the temple is a set of stairs leading to an altar with a snake that is illuminated each day by the setting sun.

**Temple of the Initial Series** is a two-room temple on the right side of El Castillo that overlooks the sea. One room is partially made of wood and inside the other is a small altar. The freeze above the door has a carving

that looks like a woman in labor, although I know this is not correct. It's the Descending God.

**House of Chultun** is opposite the Temple of Frescoes. A chultun is a cistern and some held up to 25,000 liters of water. They were dug into the ground and lined with stones. In some cases, the stones were covered with plaster. This flat-roofed building has two columns and a gallery with a small shrine in the center.

**The Great Palace** is surrounded by a row of columns that once helped form a wall. The palace is the largest building at the site and was built in the shape of an L. There are numerous flat-roofed rooms joined by a narrow corridor. The back windows have iron rings that are believed to have held curtains in place.

**Temple of the Wind** is a small sanctuary facing the sea and was used for religious purposes as late as 1924. Inside the small temple is an altar. The circular platform in front is dedicated to the God of Wind, Ehecatl. Some believe this represents the circle of birth and rebirth. On the north end of the city close to the ocean sits the **Temple of the Sea**, a one-room, flat-roofed structure with a tiny altar inside.

*Temple of the Wind, Tulum* (Sonja H)

**Tombs** close to the east entrance/exit are identifiable by the hole in the ground and the radiating side arms forming crosses. Although most people of Tulum were not buried here but were shipped to Campeche, a few exceptionally important men were. **Ceremonial Platforms** are scattered throughout the site and were probably used for dances, offerings and entertainment.

# Uxmal

Uxmal is 48 miles (78 km) south of Merida along the Campeche highway. There are public buses that pass Uxmal. The entrance is a duplicate of Chichén Itzá with restaurant, gift shops and bathrooms and long lineups at the ticket office. Open from 8 am to 5 pm, the entry fee is $10, which includes the light and sound show at 7 pm. There is a small museum that is also included in the price of the ticket. Climbing on the ruins is no longer permitted. Many tourists prefer Uxmal to Chichén Itzá because there are fewer people here. Private tours are available from Cancún, Campeche and Merida and cost $55-$99. There are two hotels adjacent to the site.

Jean Frederic Waldeck, in 1825, was the first modern researcher to explore and document information about Uxmal. Stephens and Catherwood followed two years later and described the city in their books. When Empress Carlota visited Uxmal, the local officials had visible phallic symbols removed so as not to offend the fine lady. The most famous archeologist of the early 1900s was Sylvanus Morley who drew the first map of the site. Fifteen years later, Frans Blom made plaster casts of the friezes on the Nunnery and displayed them at the 1933 Chicago World Fair.

For serious hikers, there is a causeway that links Uxmal with Kabáh in the Puuc Hills, 11 miles (18 km) to the south. It would be an all-day hike on a trail that would often disappear. Water and food would have to be carried. I have not done this hike so I can't really say how good or bad it is.

The island of **Uaymil** just offshore may have been the port for ships arriving at Uxmal. Archeologist Rafael Cobos from the University of Yucatán found 15 structures on the island. Eight of these were situated around the central plaza. The buildings and ceramics found here have design similar to those at Chichén Itzá. However, due to illegal looting over the years, it's not an island of interest to tourists.

The name Uxmal means "built three times," but for what reason, no one knows, as there are five stages of construction so far identified. Others believe the name means abundant harvest, because the rich soil in the area could produce exceptional amounts of food. Uxmal, the largest of the cities on the Puuc Route, once rivaled Palenque and Tikal, and administered Kabáh, Labna and Sayil, which are farther inland.

The Puuc-style architecture is distinct and more ornate than that from the Old Empire. The geometrical patterns were chiseled from as many as 20,000 interlocking stones before being laid in place. Half-columns flank doorways and are used as wall decorations. The lower half of most buildings was left plain.

Most cities in the Yucatán were built near cenotes but Uxmal was not. Instead, the residents collected rainwater and stored it in the 160 cisterns

*Uxmal panorama* (Palimp Sesto)

that each held between 5,200 and 9,100 gallons (20,000-35,000 liters) of water. They prayed a lot to Chaac, God of Rain.

Although not all mounds have been excavated, those that have display a number of different styles and are believed to have been built between 700 and 1100 AD. However, evidence shows people lived here as early as 800 BC. Ruled by the Xui family during its height of power, Uxmal was an ally of Chichén Itzá until around 1200, when Uxmal was abandoned and the people moved to Mani in the Puuc Hills.

**House of the Magician**, also called the **Adivino**, the first building seen after entering the site, is imposing and impressive. Legend has it that the pyramid was built in one night by the god Itzamna, a dwarf not born of a woman but from an egg and raised by a witch. The ruler of the land, fearing the dwarf's powers, ordered him to build the pyramid within one day or die. The boy succeeded and became the new ruler.

The pyramid, built in five levels is 114 feet (35½ m) high and its steepness and rounded sides make it unique in design. Customary practice in Mayaland is to build a new pyramid directly over an old one, but Adivino is built slightly to the east of the original. It took about 400 years to complete all five levels.

The temple was built to face the setting sun during the summer solstice. The best view of the building is from the western stairway, bordered by

*House of the Magician* (tato grasso)



friezes, which leads to a temple with a mask of Chac-Mool (Chaac-Mool) on the fourth level. Present here and unique to Chenes style of architecture is the entrance; it is through the mouth of Chac-Mool. The eastern stairs lead to the top or fifth level and the plaza in front has a Puuc-style building and a frieze with birds on it. The first known recycling in Mexico appears on the south side of the pyramid, over the entrance. It is crowned with a serpent mask surrounded with pieces taken from a number of different buildings. These were all carved during different periods.

The **Nunnery** has four rectangular buildings containing 74 rooms, all located around a central plaza. Some believe the nunnery was used to train medical doctors, priests and astrologers, while others think it housed kings and yet others feel it was a military academy for princes. The architecture is typically Puuc, with a plain bottom and ornate upper section designed with carvings of Chaac and serpents, interspersed with latticework. The south building is unique in that it has irregularly spaced doorways and an archway leading to the ball court. The south building represents the underworld, and the north building, which is the oldest of the buildings, represents heaven. The east and west buildings depict life on earth. The eastern one has a frieze with two-headed snakes.

The **Ball Court** was inaugurated by the king Chaan Chak in 901 and is 109 feet (34 m) long, rather small as compared to the one at Chichén Itzá. The one here is not the best preserved but its proximity to the plaza suggests it was a popular entertainment draw. Although different sizes, all courts are rectangular, with stone walls along the longer sides and serpent-shaped

stone goal posts or rings in the center of these walls. Spectator seats are above the sidewalls.

There were eleven on each team plus a captain. Each player had a kneepad and a sandal on his left foot. His arms were padded and each player wore his own jewelry and a stone or wood belt around his waist. The players' heads were adored with decorative headdresses. The weight of the full regalia must have been debilitating!

The **Governor's Palace** is considered the best Puuc architecture in existence because of the recessed corbel-vaulted archway and the exaggerated overhangs that give the building harmony. It is also the longest façade in the Yucatán, running 320 feet (97 m) in length. Built about 987 AD, it is a one-story structure sitting on an elevated platform. The palace is believed to be the last building erected in the city. The central figure here is a god in ceremonial regalia, topped with a plumed headdress. The east side of the palace has over 100 stone masks of Chaac built into the façade. The building is believed to have been an administrative center and recent studies indicate it has some astrological significance because the larger central doorway is in alignment with Venus. Behind the palace to the east is the **House of Doves**, so named because the upper temple features numerous holes for doves or pigeons.

*House of the Doves* (Régis Lachaume)

In front of the palace is the **Jaguar Throne**, a seat with two jaguar heads, each facing opposite directions. Similar seats are found at Tikal, Piedras Negras, Palenque and Xultun. Painted versions can be found at the Chaac-mool Temple in Chichén Itzá.

*The Jaguar Throne* (tato grasso)

**House of Turtles**, a small, unimposing building next to the Governor's Palace, has a cornice or frieze with many turtles carved on it. It is believed that turtles, associated with water and earth, prayed to Chaac during times of drought and suffered the same as man during these times. Because the turtle shell is often used as a drum, the turtle was associated with thunder.

*House of Turtles* *(Gérard Grandjean)*

**The Great Pyramid** at one time had nine levels but now stands at 102 feet (32 m) with just four levels. It is located behind the House of the Magician and displays good carvings of parrots and flowers. Parrots, especially macaws, represent the sun and are associated with fire because of their bright colors. In the Popul Vuh (one of the few remaining texts of the Maya) twins trick death by smoking cigars with macaw feathers in the ends, thus making the cigars appear far more dangerous.

**House of the Old Woman** is one of the oldest in the city and was the home of the dwarf who met the king's challenge and built the House of the Magician within one night. Legend is that the old woman was barren and because of this she mourned day and night. In her grief, she wrapped an egg into a cloth and placed it in the corner of this house. It hatched. Overjoyed she cared for it as she would a child and soon it was walking and talking like all other humans. Knowing what a miracle this was, she encouraged him to challenge the king, who took the challenge and told the child, who had by now grown into a dwarf, that if he didn't build a great pyramid and temple in one night he'd die. And you know the rest of the story.

The first reference to the Maya calendar, found at Monte Alban dates back to 500 BC. It has two cycles based on the numbers 13 and 20.

# X'Cambo

*X'Cambo*

X'Cambo is a small ruin within cycling distance of Puerto Telchac and just off the Progreso to Telchac Road. Open from 8 am to 5 pm daily, with no entry fee.

The name means "heavenly crocodile" or "trading place"; it was a salt trading center that supplied the nearby cities of Uxmal, Chichén Itzá and Izamal. On the way to the ruin and near the road are salt extraction pools used by the Maya during this city's productive years. The main five-tiered pyramid is from about 100 BC and has rounded corners reminiscent of Peténstyles. Staircases and temple walls were made with huge blocks of stone.

It is a quiet ruin, close to main resorts at the port and within view of the ocean. The buildings are now being reconstructed to their original elegance. The pyramids can still be climbed and one small temple can be entered. There is a burial site and three wells (holes in the ground still used today) but the most interesting aspect of the site is the intermingling of coastal and inland trees. Also, the lack of crowds allows silent contemplation of this lovely little site. However, cruise ships are now encouraging their passengers to visit here so that last comment may become history soon.

In the 1950s the Virgin appeared and a chapel was built over one of the prehistoric buildings. On May 19-20, pilgrims walk to the chapel to worship.

# Xel-Há

Xel-Há ruins are different from the Xel-Há Theme Park. The ruins, situated 11 miles (18 km) south of Akumal and 9.3 miles (15 km) north of Tulum, are accessible by bus from Cancún, Playa del Carmen or Tulum. Also, buses and collectivos can be stopped almost anywhere along the highway. When asking to go to Xela-Há, be certain to specify "las ruinas," rather than the park. The ruins are located across from the theme park and up the highway by half a kilometer, so if you do end up at the theme park, you can still walk across to the ruins. Numerous tours from the major centers go here also.

The site opens daily from 8 am to 5 pm and the entrance fee is $3. There are toilets but no restaurant or tienda selling drinks, so carry water. The site can be toured in about an hour unless you are bird watching.

Xela-Há means "where water is born," so-named because it is on one of the largest coves in the Yucatán. It also has two cenotes, rather than the usual one common at other sites.

The city was established about 100 BC as a seaport. They traded mostly with the powerful city of Cobá, which kept Xel-Há's economy stable.

**Lolthrop Group** was constructed about 1200 AD and was mostly a residential area – an old time suburb. Other than the one huge stone structure, little is left of this group. However, at one of the residential sites, the base stones form an oval. This is the only example of this kind of building at the site and there is no explanation for its design. Later buildings included mortar construction similar to neighboring villages in Belize.

*Xela-Há ruins*

**Pajaros (Parrots or Birds) Group** is a set of buildings visible from the main highway and divided into four sections. The attraction here is the original paintings still visible on the walls. One has a checkerboard design similar to the Inca flag. Beside it is a figure painted in red, blue and white wearing a multi-colored headdress made of feathers. The man also wears numerous necklaces and is believed to have visited from Teotihuacan (Mexico City). The group gets its name from the two species of birds drawn in the mural. The most recognizable are the parrots. The second, a red bird with a black beak and long tail, is possibly a quetzal.

**The Jaguar Group**, mainly from 700-1200 AD, consists of five structures, some with paintings and handprints still visible. There are also lintels over some doorways. **El Palacio** flanks the plaza on the south and has rounded corners and two rooms built on top. The interconnecting rooms on the north had vaulted roofs, slanted walls and tons of stucco, painted for esthetic purposes and used mainly to cover the unsightly mortar underneath. Of these paintings, few are as good as those in the Pajaros group.

A cenote near the Jaguar Group is surrounded by lush vegetation and is home to numerous birds. A second cenote near the western edge of the site has a small temple nearby.

The small stone buildings and altars are the oldest buildings, dating to about 100 BC. One of the paintings looks like a cat with huge black eyes, peering out at the landscape.

## X'lapak

*X'lapak (V. Lougheed)*

X'lapak is on the Puuc Route and part of a World Heritage site. It is located on Highway 261 (a paved narrow road) 73 miles (118 km) from Merida and 10 miles (17 km) after Labna. Tour companies go here. The ruin is open from 8 am to 5 pm and the entry fee is $2.50. It does not take long to tour this small site of three restored buildings and a few mounds, unless you are very interested in the detailed carvings on the main building. The site has lush vegetation with numerous species of birds.

Restored by the Department of Archeology and History in the 1960s, X'lapak has received little attention since. The name means "unglued walls." During the city's height of power between 600 and 900 AD, hundreds of stones were intricately carved and placed throughout the city. A few still remain hidden around the grounds.

The palace in the main ceremonial center has nine rooms decorated in the Puuc style with masks and geometric motifs on the upper friezes. Especially notable are the huge carvings on the corners, of Chaac, the Rain God.

There are 14 mounds altogether that give you an idea of what the ruins looked like before excavation. Should time be short, this little ruin is one that could be missed.

# Yaxuna

*Yaxuna*

Yaxuna is 12 miles (20 km) south of Chichén Itzá within the village of the same name. There is an entry fee of $3 per person and it shouldn't take more than two hours to explore. There are no facilities, so bring something to drink along. Birders may want to spend a bit more time here because of the few visitors and the lush jungle.

In the village next to the ruins is a small hotel with Maya-styled rooms where working archaeologists often congregate, ☎ 858-1482, $45 per night. This plus employment for excavation assistance has helped improve the standard of living for the locals.

The name Yaxuna means "first house" in Maya. First mapped by George Brainerd in the late 1940s, the 650 structures identified included four plazas, each with major pyramids. The temples on the pyramids contained ceramics from both the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico but only one mound, the Victory Monument on the North Acropolis, had ceramics from neighboring Chichen Itzá. These were dated from the Late Classic period. When Chichen Itzá conquered Yaxuna, they built the Victory Monument and also left their own ceramics. A tomb on the North Acropolis contained the decapitated body of an emperor. With these remains was the body of a child, presumably the heir to the throne and 13 members of the royal family. The tomb dates to the Early Classic Period and the belief is that Chichen Itzá attacked and killed the emperor and his son, probably the heir to the throne.

Another tomb on the North Acropolis contained a young male bound at the wrists and ankles. This tomb is from the Post Classic period. Along with this body were the bones of animals, birds, fish and a snake.

The **War Council House** (Popul Na), so called because of the carvings depicting war on the building, is also on the North Acropolis. Just a few hundred feet from here is the ball court. There is also an outpost about 1.2 miles (two km) up the road toward Chichen Itzá that was probably a guardhouse used to warn the citizens of impending invasion.

Most interesting is an impressive causeway that can still be followed between here and Cobá on the Caribbean coast. Built in a straight line, it has specially carved stones placed at a few places along the road. Dating from the Late Classic period, the road indicates that Yaxuna was allied with Cobá.

Quintana Roo
Rio Lagartos
Chiquila
Contoy
Tizimin
Kantunilkín
Isla Mujeres
Cuota
El Balam
Cancún
307
Puerto Morelos
Valladolid
180
Nuevo Xcan
Playa del Carmen
San Miguel
Cobá
Paamul
Puerto Aventuras
Xcaret
Akumal
Isla Cozumel
YUCATAN
Tulum
Tepich
Tihosuco
to Mérida
295
Señor
Punta Allen
307
Sian Ka'an Biosphere
Dziuché
José María Morelos
Polyuc
Felipe Carillo Puerto
293
Laguna Kana
Punta Herrero
Petcacab
QUINTANA ROO
Chacchoben
Limones
Lázaro Cárdenas
CAMPECHE
Kinichná
Majahual
Bacalar
307
Dzibanché
Calderitas
Chetumal
Nicólas Bravo
Sergio Butrón
Kohunlich
Xcalak
Caribbean Sea
GUATEMALA
BELIZE
N
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NOT TO SCALE
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# Cancún

Cancún, although not the capital of the state, is the hub of tourist activity. The cheapest flights go there and it has the widest array of resort hotels. There is every type of water sport available and every kind of cuisine to choose from. It is international rather than Mexican and a good starting point from which to explore the rest of the state.

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- Shopping 168
- Hotels 170
- Restaurants 179


## History

What we call Cancún, the city, the Maya called Ekab or Black Earth. They called the coast Kankun, meaning pot of snakes. Tulum was a fortress and trading center for the 50,0000 people living at Cobá; Xaman-ha is now called Playa del Carmen and Puerto Pole was originally Xcaret. In the areas inhabited by Maya, there were 24 distinctly different languages spoken by those with similar physical features and cultural practices. Thus, the names that appear for Maya gods are often different. For example, the Rain God is refered to as Haac by some and Chaac by others. And the Sun God can be referred to as AhKin or Kinich Ahau.

After the conquest those who survived the new diseases and the warfare migrated to Isla Mujeres and Cozumel. Ekab was left to encroaching jungle and pirate hovels. Huge cities like Chicken Itzá and Uxmal were abandoned.

to Mérida
Libre
to Isla
Mujeres
AV. UXMAL
Roble
Palmera
Palmera
Laurel
Laurel
Chaca
AV. TULUM
Pino
Monument to
the Nation
Allen
Tupac
Allen
Rosas
Nicchehabi
Margaritas
Margaritas
Tanchacte
Rosas
Yoquen
Valipich
Soliman
Xel-Há
Conoco
Nicchehabi
Azucenas
Azucenas
AV. SUNYAXCHEN
Jazmines
Jazmines
City
Hall
Tulipanes
Tulipanes
Tauch
Tauch
Gladiolas
AV. XEL-HÁ
Grozella
Nancen
Maranon
AV. YAXCHILAN
Chiabal
Gladiolas
Clavelles
Orquideas
Clavelles
Coco
Orquideas
Chiabal
Crisantemos
Pina
Crisantemos
Alcatraces
Alcatraces
AV. TANCAH
AV. COBA
AV. COBA
AV. XCARET
Jaleb
Reno
Reno
Venado
Jaleb
AV. YAXCHILAN
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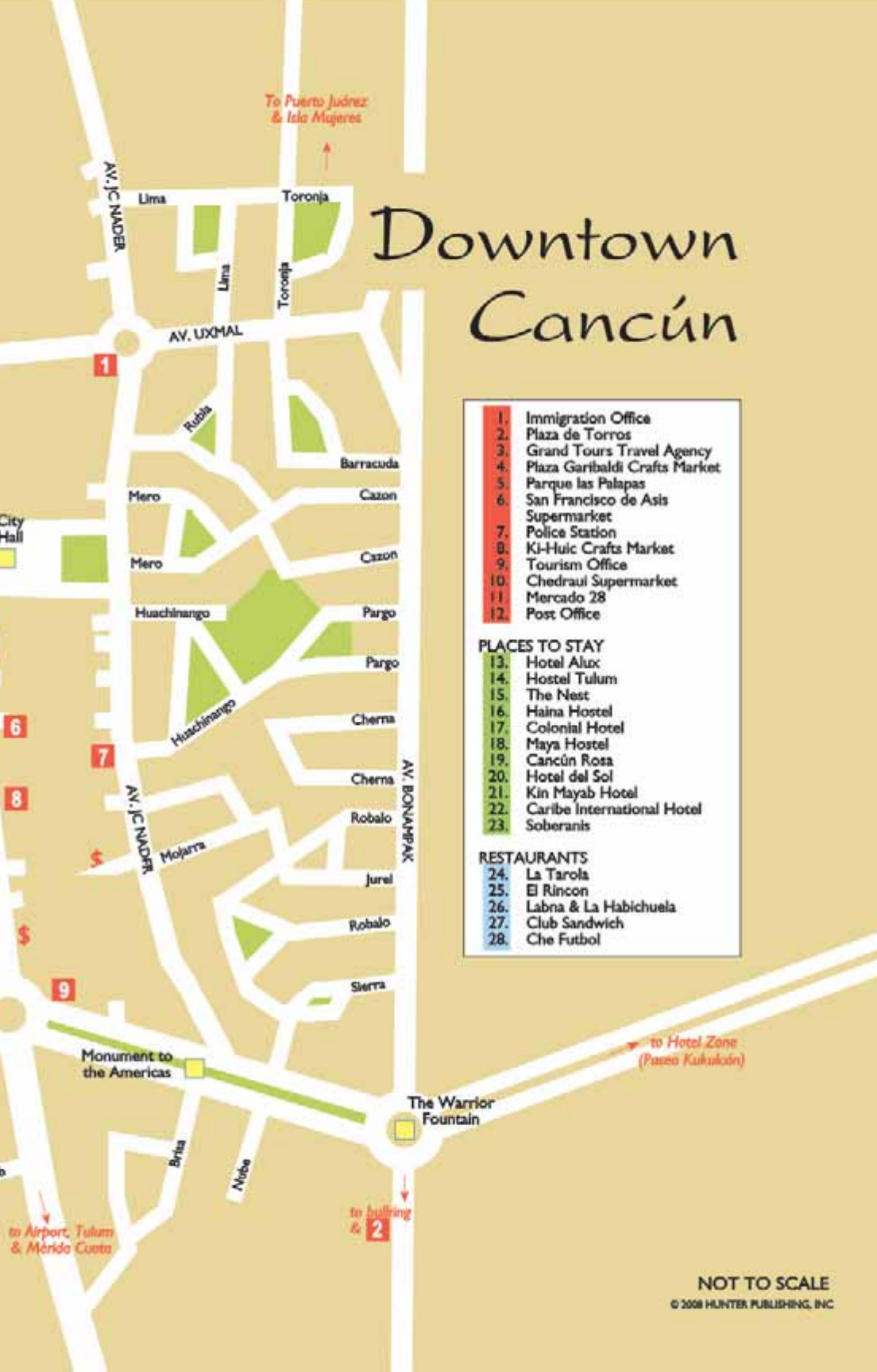

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# Hotel Zone

PLAYA LAS PERLAS
Aquamarina Beach (Km 4.5), Blue Bay Getaway (Km 3.5), Caribbean Princess, Club Carrousel (Km 3.5), Club Verano Beach (Km 3.5), Elan (Km 3.5), Holiday Inn Cancún Arenas (Km 2.5), Imperial Las Perlas (Km 2.5), Plaza Nautilus, Sotavento (Km 4), Suites Marbella

PLAYA LINDA
Barcelo Costa Cancún (Km 4.5), Club International (private), View Mediterrando, Oasis Palm Beach (Km 5), Playa Linda Marine Terminal

PLAYA LANGOSTA
Casa Maya (Km 5.5), Dos Playas, Maya Caribe (Km 6), Riu Caribe, Sunset Lagoon Resort & Marina

OUT OF TOWN
Cancún Golf Club, Holiday Inn Express, Laguna Verde, Ocean Club

PLAYA TORTUGA TO PUNTA CANÚN
Ambiance Villas, Best Western Clipper Club, Condos Carisa Y Palma, Condos Punta Cancún, Condos Salva, Condos Terrmar (Km 8.5), Dreams Cancún, El Presidente Intercontinental, Fiesta Grand (Km 9.5), Hyatt Cancún, Imperial Laguna, Krystal (Km 9), Oasis Viva (Km 8.5), Ocean Club/Pok-Ta-Pok, Plaza La Fiesta/Plaza El Zocalo, Plaza Laguna, Plaza Maya Fair, Plaza Quetzal, Riu Cancún, Riu Palace las Americas, Suites Sina, Terrmar Plaza

PLAYA CHAC-MOOL
Avalon Baccara (Km 11.5), Avalon Grande, Condos Bay View Grande, Condos Girasol (Km 9.5), Grand Caribe Real (Km 11.5), Hotel Flamingo (Km 11.5), La Blanca (Km 10), La Isla Shopping Village, Me Cancún Melia (Km 12), Park Royal Piramides (Km 12.5), Royal Sunset (Km 10), Villa Marlin (Km 12.5)

PLAYA MARLIN
Barcelo TucanCun (Km 13.5), Fiesta Americana, Golden Parnassus (Km 14.5), La Meridien (Km 14), Ritz Carlton, Royal Sands

PLAYA BELLENAS
Cancún Palaca/Mini Golf (Km 14.5), Fiesta Americana Condesa (Km 16.5), Gran Melia Cancún (Km 16.5), Grand Oasis (Km 16.5), JW Marriott (Km 14.5), Marriott Casa Magna, Omni

PLAYA MIGUELITO
Hilton Cancún (Km 17)

PLAYA DELFINES
Beach Paradise (Km 19.5), Bel Air (Km 20.5), Cancún Plaza (Km 20.5), Condos Bisas (Km 19.5), Condos Solymar, Crown Paradise (Km 18.5), El Pueblito (Km 17.5), Grand Solaris Cancún (Km 18), Oasis Playa (Km 19.5), Westin Resort (Km 20)

PUNTA NIZUC
Club Med

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*Cancún in 1970, before the building began* (Fernando Martí)

In an attempt to capture some of the international tourist trade in the late 1960s, the Bank of Mexico did a feasibility study, now dubbed "Cancún, Bankers' Fantasy," and then obtained a $27 million loan from the Inter-American Development Bank to build the first structure on the island. At the time, there were three caretakers at a coconut plantation on Isla Mujeres and another 117 people living in the nearby fishing village of Puerto Juárez. Ekab was deserted then.

Investors didn't clamor to get a spot along the sandy strip, so the Mexican government and the Bank of Mexico built nine hotels, with the first of those being Playa Blanca, now called Blue Bay Village. This is just one example of how private enterprise sometimes has to be shown the way by government. Once Club Med arrived, others followed, until the strip

*Cancún today* (Mauro I. Barea G.)

grew to 140 hotels with 28,000 hotel rooms serviced by 380 restaurants, with half being foreign-owned. Construction workers lived on the mainland in what eventually became the city of Cancún, with a population that grew to about 600,000.

During the monumental task of construction, 60 miles (100 km) of sewer lines were installed, 595 acres (240 ha) of topsoil was brought in (half was used for the golf course), and four million sq feet (372,000 sq m) of mangrove was destroyed.

Cancún is in the main Caribbean hurricane impact zone but, since its founding, there have been only two main hits: Gilbert in 1988 and Wilma in 2005. During Wilma, winds up to 150 mph (240 km/hr) ravaged the hotels, killing three people and causing $5-$8 billion in damage. Eight miles (12 km) of beach was lost, leaving a shore of unappealing jagged rocks. After the storm passed, the area lost about $15 million per day from lack of tourism, which helped encourage rapid reconstruction.

The beaches were widened with new sand, hotels were upgraded and more restaurants were added. Within a year 90% of the restoration was completed and business was back to normal.

## MAYA GODS

There are about 200 Maya gods responsible for about 400 things. Some of their responsibilities seem to overlap and some gods are assigned very odd combinations of things to do. This is the way with gods, but also the fact is that archeologists are still trying to figure the whole system out.

Acan . . . . . God of wine (the name means to groan)
AhKin . . . . . God of the Sun and protector against darkness
AhMun . . . . . God of corn
AhPuch . . . . . God of the underworld
Buluc. . . . . God of war
Cancum. . . . . God of hunting
Chaac . . . . . God of rain
Cuxtal. . . . . God of childbirth
Hunab Ku . . . . . The Supreme Creator or God of Gods
Hurakan . . . . . God of wind and wain
Itzamna . . . . . Moon God (creator for some Maya groups)
IxChel. . . . . Goddess of weavers and women in childbirth
Kisin . . . . . God of death (the stinking one)

# Getting Here & Around

Cancún is two cities. First, there is the bustling center, on the mainland, where business occurs, buses converge and locals live. There are Walmarts, Comercial Mexicanas and numerous Chedrauis department stores, Office Depot, Block Buster and Costco, along with Five Star hotels, used mainly by business people. Many excellent restaurants and bars here are patronized mostly by locals because they are less expensive than anything in the hotel zone.

The hotel zone, a narrow strip of land about 13 miles (22 km) long, situated between Laguna, Laguna Bojorques and the Caribbean Ocean, is an island joined to the mainland by bridges at Punta Nizuc and Playa Linda. The hotel zone is shaped like a seven, with the longer strip exposed more to heavy wave action than the beaches along the north or short side of the seven. The north shore beaches are protected by Isla Mujeres and see less wave action.

**Boulevard Kukulkan**, a four-lane paved highway running the entire length of the strip, is serviced by local buses, taxis, private vehicles and hotel shuttles. The north and east side of the boulevard are crammed with modern hotels, exotic spas and expensive resorts. The opposite side is mostly shopping malls, stores, restaurants and bars, filled with foreigners of all shapes, colors, sizes and states of inebriation.

**Tulum Avenue**, on the mainland, parallels the strip to Punta Nizuc on its southern tip and ends at the tastefully designed airport, which receives about 190 flights a day. Just north of Cancún is Isla Mujeres where those bored with the strip go for new-scenery parties.

If staying in the hotel zone, you can rent or purchase just about anything imaginable. The center is a bit different and far more Mexican than the strip. Buses out of Cancún are found at the station on the corner of Uxmal and Tulum, just a few blocks north of Kukulcan Blvd.

It is both easy and safe to be in either the center or the strip.



**DISTANCES FROM CANCÚN**

| | |
|---|---|
| Campeche | 490 km/305 miles |
| Chetumal | 380 km/236 miles |
| Mérida | 321 km/199 miles |
| Mexico City | 1,820 km/1131 miles |
| Playa del Carmen | 52 km/32 miles |
| Valladolid | 172 km/107 miles |

Taking a city bus to and from the Hotel Zone is easy, cheap (about seven pesos) and very safe. Don't let your tour guide or hotel manager talk you out of a great adventure, whether it be shopping,

having a beer or talking with some of the locals, many of whom speak English. Buses with Route #1 painted on the window go from the farthest end of the hotel zone to the central bus station in town.

A luxury bus costing $9 runs between the bus station in town and the airport. You should book ahead. Allow an extra hour if taking this bus. One leaves every hour from 5 am to 10 pm daily, including all holidays.

**Taxis**, ☎ 840-0651, cost $7-$13 along the hotel zone, depending on how far you go. An hourly service costs $12. If going from town to Puerto Juárez, it is $1.70, to Punta Sam $3.60 and the airport, $17.

## AIRLINE OFFICES

| | |
|---|---|
| Aero Costa, Av Tulum #29 | ☎ 884-0383 |
| Aero Mexico, Av Cobá #80, sm 3 | ☎ 287-1868 |
| Air Europa, Av Tulum, Hotel Oasis America | ☎ 898-2250 |
| American, Airport | ☎ 886-0086 |
| Aviacsa, Av Cobá #39 sm 4 | ☎ 887-4214 |
| Click Mexicana, Av Covà #5, Plaza America | ☎ 884-2000 |
| Continental, Airport | ☎ 886-0008 |
| Copa, Airport | ☎ 886-0653 |
| Cubana, Av Tulum #232 | ☎ 887-7210 |
| Delta, Airport | ☎ 886-0668 |
| KLM/Northwest, Airport | ☎ 800-447-4747 |
| Lan Chile, Airport | ☎ 886-0360 |
| Lineas Aereas Azteca, Airport | ☎ 886-0827 |
| Magni Charters, Av Nader #93 and Cobá | ☎ 884-0600 |
| Martin Air Holland, Airport | ☎ 886-0070 |
| Mexicana de Aviacion, Av Tulum # 269 | ☎ 881-9090 |
| United, Airport | ☎ 800-0-0307 |
| Viajes Liberacion, Yaxchilan #99 sm 20 | ☎ 884-6542 |
| Volaris, Airport | ☎ 800-8-6527 |

## Emergency/Useful Numbers

| | |
|---|---|
| Fire | ☎ 116 |
| Red Cross | ☎ 065 |
| Highway Police | ☎ 884-1107 |
| State Tourism | ☎ 881-9000 |
| Consumer Protection | ☎ 884-2634 |

# What to See & Do

Cancún has **bowling** at Boliche Kukulcan, Blvd Kukulcan, Km 13, ☎ 885-2305, a **pool hall** at Billar el Marques, Plaza Las Hadas, Av Q. Roo and Sol, ☎ 880-9557, **Go-Karts** at Airport Road, Km 7.5, ☎ 882-1246, **mini golf** at the Hotel Palace, Blvd Kukulcan, Km 14, ☎ 885-0867, and **paint ball** at Paint Ball City, Av. Luis Donaldo Colosiio, Km 7, ☎ 842-6204. Entry fees and operating times vary.

## The Ruins

**El Rey** is in the Hotel Zone and is easily accessible. **Chichén Itzá**, **Tulum** and **Cobá** are close to Cancún and each can be visited independently within a day. Xel-Há is a theme park that has ruins of the same name across the road and south about half a kilometer. This is an all-day excursion whether you take a public bus or go by tour and whether you visit both the ruin and the park or just one of the two. **Uxmal** is farther away and cannot be visited with other sites in a day, but **Ek Balam** is just 18 miles (30 km) north of Valladolid and can be visited at the same time as Chichén Itzá. **Yaxuna**, another ruin 15 miles (20 km) south of Chichén Itzá, could be included in the same tour as Chichén. There are tours that will take you to all or some of the sites in a day. Should you wish to rent a car and visit the highly recommended **Biosphere/ruins of Calakmul**, you will need overnight accommodations away from Cancún.

*El Rey (jok2000)*

# In the Air

**Chichen-Há Zip Line Canopy Tour**, #3 Av Xpuhil, ☎ 803-0684, www.travelrm.com, $90 for adults, $80 for children under 12, is one of the most popular experiences in Latin America. You get to explore the jungle canopy on walkways suspended up to 450 feet (150 m) in the air and zip on a cable from one platform to the other. Chichen-Há takes about an hour to reach from Cancún. A number of tour operators offer zip-line trips to Isla Mujeres at Garrafon Park or on one of the numerous private lines. Isla Mujeres takes one or two hours to reach by vehicle. Ask at your hotel tour operator or contact one listed below.

**Selvatica**, ☎ 847-4581 or 847-4591, www.selvatica.com.mx, offers 12 lines joined by 24 platforms. Some lines are fast, some a bit tamer but combined they are the longest in North America. These lines are south of Cancún near Playa del Carmen and Puerto Morelos and 15 miles (20 km) into the jungle on a secondary road. If you have your own car, the entrance fee is $55 for adults and $40 for children. To get here, drive to Puerto Morales and then go west toward Vallarta along the Ruta de los Cenotes. There is a sign 12 miles (19 km) from the turn-off. Both Selvatica and Chichen-Há offer the same thrill.

Upon arrival at the private zip-lines, some tours include a mountain bike ride to a cenote where swimming is encouraged (bring a suit) and a talk about the local fauna is offered. Once harnessed, zip-liners fly along the lines stretched over the jungle, stopping at platforms along the way to catch their breath under the pretence of observing the wildlife and changing lines. Runs are usually around 180 feet (60 m) long, with one run at Chichen-Há swinging over a cenote to a distant observation tower.

This activity is not recommended for those with back problems or other handicaps, heart problems, obesity, or claustrophobia. Children under six (although Selvatica will accept younger children harnessed with their parents), those under the influence of drugs or alcohol and pregnant women will not be permitted to participate.

# On Water

Most hotels offer water skis, para-sailing, rubber rafts, kayaking, surfing, motorized jets and snorkeling tours. The most popular motorized tour is the Jungle Tour (see page 156) where guests are propelled through the mangroves and lagoon at breath-stopping speeds.

## Fishing

Angling for billfish, marlin and sailfish is popular from March to mid-September. The best fishing is from April to June inclusive. White marlin is popular from April to August. However, dorado, bonito, barracuda, king, mackerel, sharks, jacks, yellow tail, snapper, grouper, tuna and wahoo are available all year.

Most popular is the open water east of Isla Mujeres where the depths of La Grieta are good for trolling while drifting in the current. Correntada, another hot spot popular with locals, is east of Contoy Island and Cancún Point.

For those wanting to fly fish, there are places at Nichupte and Bojorquez Lagoons or Isla Blanca just offshore. The fish available all year for flies are baby tarpon, snook, snapper, barracuda, and jacks. Summer offers bonefish and permit. At Isla Blanca there is sea trout and ladyfish. All fishing gear is included.

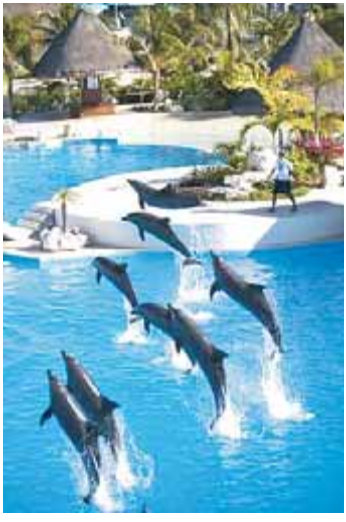
By law the owner of the fishing license owns the fish caught and decides what should be done with them. More recently, catch and release is practiced. If taking a charter, your package should include, captain, first mate, bait, gear, beer and pop. The cost for four hours with six people will be about $440. A full day will be closer to $660. Some companies offer shared trips that cost $95 for four hours or $115 per person for six hours. Night trips cost $65 per person, leaving at 7 pm and lasting until midnight.

### MANGROVES

Mangrove forests are a unique ecosystem, usually found parallel to coral reefs. Because the plants like brackish, nutrient-poor water, in a symbiotic process, they clarify it for the coral. Red mangroves found closest to or in the water, trap silt and rotting leaves around their roots. As the debris turns to soil, the red mangrove dies and the white mangrove takes over. White mangroves are salt-tolerant and have a unique root system that grows above high-water levels. Seedpods develop on the ends of these non-immersed roots and, after they ripen, fall into the ground and germinate. The above-water roots facilitate the exchange of gases. Some mangroves filter salt water through their roots while others release the salt through their pores and leaves.

## Aquariums, Water Parks & Water Tours

**La Isla Interactive Aquarium**, Blvd. Kukulcan, Km 12.5, Hotel Zone, ☎ 883-0411 or 800-012-0856, open 9 am to 9 pm. The cost to enter is $14 to see two fish tanks and a third tank with crustaceans. You can also visit the petting zoo and watch visitors pet the sea creatures or see the dolphins performing with those who have paid to swim with dolphins. The petting zoo costs $65 for one person, $100 for two and $120 for three. This allows you to go into the tank and touch/feed the rays and sharks. To swim/kiss/pet and play with dolphins the cost is $65 for half an hour. For this you must book 24 hours in advance, be a minimum of 3½ feet tall and arrive one hour before your scheduled swim time. A video of the swim will cost $30 and a photo $10. Underwater cameras are available for $10. Included is the food for the animals, a guide, wetsuit and a towel for drying yourself after your encounter. There are lockers to put personal belongings. The exit is through the souvenir shop. This is a very expensive tour. Do not book this tour in an all-inclusive package. If something goes wrong, the aquarium will not refund your money.



**Wet-N-Wild Water Parque Nizuc**, Kukulcan Blvd Km 25, ☎ 881-3000, open daily from 10 am to 5:30 pm, www.dolphinaris.com, is a two-part 18-acre water theme park. The **Atlantida** (1st part) has a swim-with-dolphins program and an all-day Trainer-for-a-Day program. If you wish to do this you should book ahead. The Wet-N-Wild Park (2nd part) includes numerous wild and tame water slide and wave pool activities. The one-hour dolphin swim is $135 and includes entry to the water park. The best way to get to this water park is to take a local bus heading to the airport and ask to be let off.

**Xcaret** and **Xel-Há** (see pages 155 and 256) are popular destinations for both Mexican tourists and North American family groups. Both parks sell day passes that include some or all that is offered and generally speaking the full day pass is the best deal. However, if traveling independently, you must leave Cancún bus station around 7 am if you wish to get there for opening (9 am) and have enough time to see it all before closing (9 pm). The prices are high and some of the events are a bit hokey but if it's your first time exploring the Maya and their culture or your first time to the tropics, it could be worthwhile.

**Xcaret**, 62 miles (100 km) south of Cancún (just south of Playa del Carmen), www.xcaret.com, is a nature-oriented Mexican Disneyland that offers a chance to swim with dolphins, watch sea turtles, admire a live jaguar, and watch a butterfly emerge from a cocoon. There are flower gardens and a reconstructed archeological site.

*Xcaret*

Basic entry fee is $62 ($95 for two days) and includes visits to the aquarium, butterfly pavilion, zoo, bat cave, orchid house, mushroom farm, Jaguar Island, Deer Island, a bee farm, Monkey Island, a greenhouse, and a crocodile farm. You can swim in the underground river, at the inlet and beach and watch the Mexican Folklorica-style show. All washroom facilities, beach chairs and hammocks are included.

To swim with dolphins, the cost is $125 (above the basic entry fee), snorkeling is $31, snuba (see below) is $40 and to snuba on a reef tour is $49 per person. Dinner is an extra $45. Children under 40 inches are free and those 41-55 inches in height are half-price.

Snuba is a new activity that combines snorkeling with diving. The breathing tank is left on the raft at the surface and breathing is done through a regulator connected to the tank. You also have a mask, fins, and lead belt.

The Xcaret archaeological site was excavated and reconstructed with the developers' help so the history would be preserved and available to visitors. The site was once the Maya trading center of Puerto Pole, used during the late Post-Classic period.

To get here, take a bus from Km 8.5 in the hotel zone (☎ 883-3143) or from the bus station in Old Cancún. The trip takes an hour. There are numerous tours in Cancún that will also take you worry-free.

My opinion? Skip it and visit Calakmul and Celestún. But if you've never done or seen some of the things mentioned above you may want to take this in.

**Whale Sharks**, Isla Holbox Whale Shark Tours, Isla Holbox, ☎ 875-2173, www.travelYucatan.com/whale_shark_holbox/whale_shark_holbox.php, can be observed during July and August when the snappers and groupers are spawning. This occurs earlier, between April and May, in Belize. The whales like the taste of the fertilized eggs. Whale sharks are the biggest and rarest but least vicious of all fish (they are not whales but named so because of their size). At one time the tours went to Isla Holbox, a three-hour drive each way, but it has since been found that there are many sharks closer to Cancún, so there's less driving. The cost is $175 for adults and $125 for children under 12. The tour goes only Tuesdays and Fridays, leaving your hotel at about 7 am and returning at 3 pm. Lunch and snorkel gear are included.

*Whale shark*

Whale sharks are the largest fish on earth, growing to a maximum size of 60 feet (20 m). They live up to 60 years and become sexually mature once they are 27 feet (nine m) long. Females have two uteri and can carry up to 300 infants at one time ranging in length from 15-25 inches (40-60 cm) each.

**Jungle Tour**, Blvd Kukulcan, Km 13.5, Hotel Zone, ☎ 885-1108, blueray@prodigy.net.mx (also available through most hotel tour desks) costs $65 per adult and $35 for children. They will race you through the Caribbean and over to the lagoon through mangrove forests (this can be spectacular) in a speedboat that will hold two or four persons. Your 2½-hour tour includes 45 minutes of snorkeling, life jackets, snorkeling equipment, bottled water and an English-speaking guide. It does not include the $2 park fee, $5 refundable locker deposit or tanning lotion.

**B.O.B. Submarines**, Blvd. Kukulcan, Km 4, El Embarcadero, Hotel Zone, ☎ 849-4440 or 849-7284, costs $75 per person for 2½ hours. Departures are at 9, 11:30 am, 2, and 4:30 pm daily. This adventure includes 20 minutes of

instructions, a 20-minute catamaran ride to and from the reefs, a half-hour assisted dive at the Chintales Reefs off Isla Mujeres, soft drinks and water. BOB stands for "Breathing Observation Bubble" and is a little underwater electric motor scooter with an air-filled helmet that permits you to breath. Although the wildlife isn't hugely abundant, the coral is flourishing and BOB is a blast.

**Subsee Explorer**, Aquaworld, Blvd Kukulcan Km 15.2, Hotel Zone, ☎ 848-8300. $50 for adults will take you for an hour to the coral reefs. The glass boat, called a submarine, has huge picture windows that are submersed (rather than a glass bottom). The tour includes an English-speaking guide who explains the reef's formation and current environmental concerns.

**Wave Runners**, Aquaworld, Blvd Kukulcan Km 15.2, Hotel Zone, ☎ 848-8300, or Wave Runners, ☎ 887-5423. These high-powered seadoos, each seating two people, can be rented from 9:30 am to 5 pm and cost $45 for half an hour. The machines are also available at a number of hotels. Check with your tour desk for alternatives to Aquaworld.

**Catamaran Tours** depart from Las Perlas Hotel, Blvd Kukulcan, Km 2, and come as either half-day or full-day charters that can include up to 16 people. The cost for a private tour is from $160 for one person for half a day up to $690 for 16 people for a full day. Lunch is $9 extra per person.

Private charters include an open bar, snorkeling equipment and a stop at Isla Mujeres. A 25% deposit is required at time of booking. The same company can arrange sailing tours at $450 for four hours. The price includes a 34-foot sailboat, the captain, the crew, snorkel gear, water, beer, pop and all taxes. The time schedules are variable. It is best to contact them through their web page, www.cancun-discounts.com/tours/cancun/private-catamaran-charter.htm, or check at the dock at Las Perlas Hotel, ☎ 849-4270.

**Shotover Jet**, Black Pearl Marina, Blvd Kukulcan, Km 9, Hotel Zone, ☎ 883-1690, www.shotoverjet.com.mx, $50 for adults, $25 for children under 12. This sport was first practiced in New Zealand during the 1970s. Today, it's a popular sport in many countries, including Mexico. They leave the marina every half hour and race through Nichupte and Bojorquez Lagoons, making 180° turns on a dime to heighten your adrenaline level. They also claim to offer tons of wildlife sightings. This I doubt. The boats have 500hp V8 engines and they spew 400 liters (90 gallons) of water per second out the back so it can skim the rivers at 70 km (30 mi) per hour. Their contribution to the environment is that they use propane rather than gasoline. Lifejackets are mandatory.

## Booze Cruises

Booze cruises are popular with the spring break crowd. Its for the young and foolish, though the few oldsters wanting to participate are seldom thrown overboard. The cruises come in four versions. ***Captain Hook's Pirate Ship*** leaves the pier at Playa Linda at 7 pm daily. The tour offers a 3½ hours on a 93-foot Spanish boat for a dinner

of lobster or steak and all you can drink. After dinner the half-swacked guests board a second ship and enjoy a pirate's battle before embarking on more drinking. For those still able to stand, some dancing to loud Mexican music is encouraged to end the evening. The cost is $70 for steak or $85 for steak and lobster plus a $7 Marine Tax paid when you arrive at the dock. Children are half-price. The **Cancún Booze Cruise** leaves Fat Tuesday Pier in Cancún every Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday at 6:30 pm. The cost is $65 for adults and half for kids. This is the original booze cruise and offers five hours of free boozing along with authentic Caribbean music from numerous islands, including Cuba, Jamaica and the Dominican Republic. Dinner is served on a beach on Isla Mujeres, which is followed by more drinking, lots of music/noise and some dancing. The **Cancún Party Tours** leave Congo Terrace every night at 8 pm except Sundays and the cost is $65 per person. Children under 18 are not allowed. This tour is strictly for partiers, with no romantic corners for the quieter types. The tour covers four nightclubs over a period of seven hours, where participants can drink as much as their bodies will hold. The ports visited can vary, so check carefully before booking to make sure you will be visiting the places of your choice. I can't imagine this tour being too full to accommodate those without reservations but you can reserve through their web page, www.cancuncd.com/cancun-nightlife.php.

## Diving

**Snorkeling** is best at Punta Nizuc (see pages 149, 162). The point is the most northern tip of the largest barrier reef in the Americas, and the second-largest in the world after Australia's barrier reef. Other sites reported to be good are Cuevenos, Punta Cancún, El Bajito. Closer to Isla Mujeres are Tavos, Manchones and Lighthouse. The sites around Isla Contoy have rougher water and less visibility. An interesting place to snorkel is the Nichupte Lagoon, which is fed by underwater springs. Independent and experienced snorkelers should try the offshore reefs near El Presidente Hotel on Isla Mujeres. Be aware that,

since Hurricane Wilma, snorkeling is not nearly as impressive in some spots because of reef damage.

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**Parrotfish** swim in a harem with ust one male. When he dies, the largest, strongest surviving parrotfish changes color and sexual orientation and becomes the ruling male.

**Garrafon National Marine Park** on Isla Mujeres is a protected reserve with some underwater wildlife. To get there you must take a boat or ferry from Cancún to Isla and then a bus or taxi to the end of the island where the park is located.

It is best to bring your own gear if at all possible. However, most hotels rent gear for about $5-$10 per day. Remember that visibility decreases proportionally when the water is rough and the winds high.

**Tips:** These waters have strong undertow. Be certain (even if you are a strong swimmer) to always use a lifejacket. Never snorkel alone. To keep your mask clear, spit on it, spread the spit and then rinse it in the water. Keep hair out of the seal of the mask as it will break the fit and allow water to enter.

**Deep sea diving** in Cancún can be challenging to divers of most skill and experience levels. All the marinas offer diving tours or courses for beginners and some offer certification courses. Many dives around Isla Mujeres are good for beginners. Two-tank dives cost $70 and usually leave around 8:30 am and return 1:30 pm. Two-tank night dives are $80 and lessons run about $150 per hour. Cenote and cave dives are popular because of the clear water and miles of tunnels and rooms to explore. These are only for the very experienced.

Contoy Island is a rookery for pelicans, frigates and cormorants. Diving near here is for the experienced only because of strong currents.

Diving after flying is quite safe. However, diving should be discontinued at least 24 hours before flying to help prevent decompression problems.

Below are a few of the more popular sites in the Cancún area. There is good diving all the way down to the Belize border. But before you book, talk with other travelers and find out what's hot and who is offering the best trip for the best price.

### Dive Sites Near Cancún

**Gunboat C-55** is a moderate 45- to 50-foot shipwreck dive; the gunboat is down about 80 feet and was put there by the Mexican government to encourage diving. This dive is recommended for experienced divers. The current is usually strong and the water much colder. With luck, you will see snappers, sharks, turtles, groupers, octopus and barracuda.

**Gunboat C-58** is a 50- to 60-foot dive located on the east side of Cancún. This is another shipwreck dive; the minesweeper is down about 80 feet. Recommended for experienced divers because the current is strong and the water cold. There are barracuda, amberjacks, sting rays sharks and turtles near the ship. The minesweeper was torn apart by Hurricane Ivan in 2004.

**San Miguel** is a 50- to 60-foot dive on the east side of Cancún near Punta Nazuc and, because of currents, is for experienced divers.

**El Tunel, Los Cuevones** and **Chintales** are all shallow dives between 30 and 50 feet. **Las Banderas** is one of the better 30-foot dives on the north side of Punta Cancún and south of Isla Mujeres. These are drift dives in the outer reef, which has elkhorn coral, ledges and overhangs.

**La Boya de los Locos** is close to Punta Nizuc, at the northernmost section of the reef, and is a deep dive reserved for the more experienced.

**Los Manchones Chicos** is a 30-foot dive near the southwest end of Isla Mujeres. Water temperatures are around 80°F. There is a solid reef 15 feet down that has fan corals and sponges.

**Los Manchones Grande** is an open-water dive with elkhorn coral offering shelter to snappers and grunts.

**Cave of the Sleeping Sharks** is a 70-foot dive to a cave, first explored by Jacques Cousteau in the 1960s. However, due to its popularity, the sleeping sharks that were here seem to have found new places to snooze. The cave is still interesting to explore but you need to be an experienced diver. For more cave diving/snorkeling, see the descriptions in the Playa del Carmen and Tulum sections on pages 218 and 255.

## ETIQUETTE

If going anywhere around the reefs, be certain to follow some basic rules. Encourage all guides to follow these same water-manners.

- Anchor only in sand.
- Don't collect coral or purchase products made from coral, especially the endangered, slow-growing black coral.
- Don't move or touch corals or plants as this may damage them and disturb any wildlife hidden within.
- Leave underwater caves and ledges within a short period of time since air bubbles can become abrasive to the delicate organisms. Have only one person enter the cave at a time to avoid crowding and coming in contact with plants or corals.
- If something touches you, don't panic and kick as this could cause damage to whatever it might be. Move away carefully.
- Do not feed or "ride" marine animals such as rays or dolphins. Touching causes anxiety in the fish and animals.
- Observe fishing laws and respect closed seasons. This includes not eating lobster or conch during the closed season.

# On Horseback

**Rancho Loma Bonita**, Km 49 on the Tulum-Cancún Highway, ☎ 887-5423 or 887-5465, www.rancho-lomabonita.com, has a combination of adventures including horseback riding with a dip in the ocean, horseback and ATV excursions or horseback riding and snorkeling. The horses, like humans, are varied in personality. Be certain to inform the guides of your riding ability. If you prefer, guides will take you through forested areas beside a lagoon so birds and small animals may be observed.

**Hacienda Andalucia Equestrian & Polo Club**, 307 Alfredo V. Bonfil, ☎ 883-1456 or 883-0722 (on the highway between downtown Cancún and the airport) offers rides through the jungle using western or English saddles or no saddles at all. There are areas for trotting and galloping and those interested in jumping can practice or take lessons. The cost for a half-day, starting with hotel pickup and drop-off, is $65 for adults and $55 for children. The wranglers will try to match you with a horse for your experience level. There are ponies available for young children. Trip departures are at 9 am or noon. You can also join a game of polo if you know the game and how to handle horses. If you are a real horse person, you can book a room here also and have ring lessons, polo classes, stable management classes or trial rides.

# Bullfights

**The Plaza de Toros**, Av Bonampak #4, downtown Cancún, ☎ 884-8248 or 884-8372, $40 for adults, children under 12 free, offers a full evening of entertainment every Wednesday, starting at 3:30 pm. Be certain to choose seats facing east so you are in the shade. Sitting for a few hours in the sun can be blistering. To truly enjoy and partly understand Mexican culture at least one bullfight should be watched. The matador (not to mention the beauty of his costume) is admired like a talented dancer. Each fight lasts

about 20 minutes and is divided into three stages. The first features the picadors who stab the bull, testing his strength. The second brings on the banderillas who use darts on the bull's back to weaken him. Finally, the matador plays with the bull, using mostly his cape until he finds a good time to strike with a sward and slash the aorta.

Bullfighting started with bull worship and sacrifice. It developed in Rome as entertainment before gladiator fights. Later the sport was practiced in preparation for war. By the 1700s, the fighting was done by the matadors on foot rather than from horseback. The first banning of the sport was in 1567 by Pope Pius V, who deemed it a barbaric event. Animal rights groups consider this a blood sport but those supporting the event feel it should continue as it has since the dawn of modern history.

## At the Zoo

**Crococun Zoo**, Km 31 south of Cancún, three km before Puerto Morelos, ☎ 850-3719, www.crococunzoo.com, $18 for adults, $12 for children, open 8 am to 5 pm daily, is a sophisticated petting zoo where guests can feed monkeys, hold snakes, pat deer and walk near crocodiles. Some exotic animals can also be observed. This is probably the best zoo along the Riviera Maya.

## On the Links

**Cancún Golf Club** at Pok-ta-Pok, Blvd Kukulcan, Km 7.5, Hotel Zone, ☎ 883-1230 or 883-1277, www.cancungolfclub.com, is the oldest (and some say the best) course in Cancún. Designed in 1976 by Robert Trent Jones, Jr., it is an 18-hole, par-72, 6,602-yard course. There is also a driving range and three tennis courts. The club house is open every day from 6:30 am to 6 pm. There is also a roving bar for those playing. Each year on October 13 and 14th, this club has an anniversary tournament. If interested, contact the club directly. Rates are $175 during high season and $145 for low. Evenings are $125 in high season and $115 inlow. Club rentals are $45, shoes $18. Some hotels offer a discount card for this course.

*Hilton Cancún Beach & Golf Resort*

**Hilton Cancún Beach & Golf Resort**, Blvd Kukulcan Km 17, ☎ 881-8000, www.hiltoncancun.com/golf.htm, is an 18-hole, par-72, 6,734-yard course designed by Tom Weiskopf, with water holes and sand traps on 150 acres of tropical landscape and Maya ruins. The biggest waterhole is the Nichupte Lagoon, which already has a huge array of sacrificial balls at the bottom. The course will challenge anyone with its narrow fairway, 80 sand traps and treacherous bunkers. Hole seven is the notorious "island tee," with visiting peacocks, crocs and lizards from the ruins next door. There is a clubhouse, restaurant, pro shop and practice green. A caddie will cost $20. Green fees are $199 for 18 holes and $149 if staying at the Hilton. Evening games are $149 and $99 if staying at the hotel.

**Playa Mujeres Golf Club**, Av Bonampak, Punta Sam, ☎ 887-7322, www.playamujeresgolf.com, is an 18-hole, par-72, 7,218-yard course that is open from 8 am to 5 pm daily. This Greg Norman green, surrounded by mangrove and dotted with dunes, has wide fairways, a driving range, putting greens and a clubhouse with bar. Club rentals are $50, shoes $20 and lessons $60 per hour. Tee rates are $230 from November to April, $185 from May to October.

**El Camaleon**, Km 298 Cancún-Playa del Carmen Highway, ☎ 206-3088, www.fairmontgolf.com/courses, is an 18-hole, par-72, 7,000-yard, Greg Norman-designed course. The maintenance is immaculate and five of the 18 holes are challenging. Some greens are close to the ocean and you must often swing into a side-wind. There are exceptional views. The cost is $230 for visitors, $138 for twilight games for visitors and $165 for resort guests during the day or $99 for evenings. Children cost $70 per game.

## On Wheels

**Rancho Loma Bonita**, Km 49 on the Tulum-Cancún Highway, ☎ 887-5423 or 887-5465, www.rancholomabonita.com, offers trips through the jungle and along the beach on ATVs. The speed and free-wheeling has been toned down from a few years ago, which is better for the environment and safer for you. Getting hurt in Mexico could prove quite inhibiting for your vacation. This company offers insur-

ance for riders and its advisable to purchase it if you don't already have some. If injury should occur, this activity would be considered an extreme sport by your medical insurers.

## Tour Operators

**Cancún Mermaid**, Calle Muna #54, ☎ 843-6517, www.cancunmermaid.com, is reputed to be the best in Cancún for diving tours. They also do ATV, jungle, fishing, and ruin tours. The prices are comparable to other agents but their reputation is on the upper end. In operation since the 1970s this family-run business also specializes in snorkel tours ($50 for adults and $35 for kids) that are safe and fun for youngsters. The company is ecologically sensitive and works toward promoting this type of image.

**Scuba Cancún**, Km 5, ☎ 849-7508, www.scubacancun.com.mx, takes divers to some of the farther sites ($140/two tank) and to some of the cenotes. Reservations should be made and discounts are available for those with their own gear. Snorkel trips are at a shallow reef about 20 minutes offshore and go at 2 pm and 4:30 pm daily.

**Aquaworld**, Km 15.2, ☎ 848-8300, www.aquaworld.com.mx, info@aquaworld.com.mx, is by far the largest tour operator in Cancún, offering Sub-Sea Exploring and the Wave Runner (see page 157), diving and snorkeling trips, and a lot more.

**Marina Blue Ray**, Blvd Kukulcan, Km 13.5, Lagoon side, ☎ 885-1108, $66 for adults, $33 for children under 12, offers a 2½-hour "Jungle Trip" through the lagoon and mangroves with an English speaking guide. They will pick you up and deliver you to your hotel for a small fee but encourage guests to use the cheap and efficient public transportation that takes no more than 15 minutes to reach their place from anywhere in the hotel zone. Tours leave at 9 and 10 am, 12, 1, 3 and 4 pm daily. This is a good outfit.

**Grand Tours Travel Agency**, Av Uxmal and Laurel, ☎ 887-2328, grandtourscun@prodigy.net.mx, are general tour agents able to book international and domestic flights, but specialize in flights and events in Cuba. They also offer excursions to some Maya sites.

# Nightlife

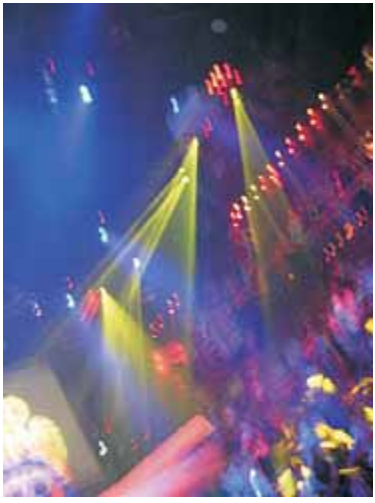
Cancún specializes in nightlife, especially for the young during spring break. But all year round things bubble like good champagne at the world-class discos, and especially at the salsa and jazz bars. The good times last from around midnight until the sun rises on the Caribbean.

There is usually live music and often the entry fee includes all you can drink. After you've partied your face off in the hotel zone, head over to Isla Mujeres for a change of scene. If you are the quiet type, you may want to book a room in town.

Of all the popular places, Senior Frogs is famous for table dancing and Coco Bongo's for revving up to 1,800 youngsters in a salsa. None of the nightlife is cheap. Drinks, if not included in your entry fee, will be about $5 each and many of these are lower-quality domestic liquors, some of which are watered down.

Unless you are especially unruly, the police won't bother you. However, if you are drunk night after night, looking like a loud-mouthed clown, the locals can get disgusted.

If the following party scenes don't fill your needs, ask around and see where others interested in your style of entertainment are going and follow them.



*Coco Bongo*

**El Ruedo**, Plaza Las Avenidas, ☎ 887-8761, no cover charge, has wild live entertainment every night and is a favorite for spring breakers.

**Coco Bongo**, Km 9.5, ☎ 883-5061, is a multi-level building that can hold up to 1,800 who have worked themselves into a frenzy. There are huge screens bringing entertainment along with bar-top conga lines, live bands and bubbles, balloons and confetti.

**Bulldog Café**, Km 8, ☎ 848-9800, open 10 pm to morning, where live bands play rock, hip hop, pop, salsa and the international top 10. This is a huge place holding up to 2,000 partiers.

**Slices**, Km 9.5, ☎ 883-1877, does not have a cover charge or a dance floor so people dance on the tables, bar, chairs and even in the toilet. This is a popular place. It seems that balancing on a table or bar when inebriated is the big challenge of Cancún.

**Azúcar**, Punta Cancún, ☎ 848-7000, is a bit more sophisticated and features salsa bands from Cuba, the Dominican Republic and South America. There are private booths if you'd like a little less attention than you'd get at some bars. The only drawback is it's a long way down the strip so a taxi or bus is necessary.

**Señor Frog's**, Km 9.5, ☎ 883-1092, has become associated with the anything-goes party scene across Mexico. They serve food here and the "longest yard" is recommended with your order. What is it? Go and try one.

## Shopping

Foreigners frequent shopping malls as much as the sandy beaches and tequila bars. Cancún has been able to attract such exclusive shops as Tiffanys, Louis Vuitton and Gucci. For shopping ideas pick up the glossy magazine called *Window*. It is free throughout Cancún.

**Kukulkan Plaza**, Km 13, boasts 72,000 sq yards (60,000 sq m) of shopping stores with six specialty restaurants and a food court. **Plaza La Isla**, on Lagoona Nichupte, has a marina, aquarium, disco and movie theater plus a plethora of expensive shops. **Flamingo Plaza** at Km 11.5 uses designer decorations of marble, brass and glass to attract shoppers to their many sports shops. **Plaza Caracol**, Kukulkan Blvd, Km 8.5, just north of the convention center, has over 200 shops, art galleries and boutiques, some of which are Gucci, Ralph Lauren and Benetton. **Plaza Las Americas** is on Av Tulum in Old Cancún and attracts the more moderate shopper with stores such as Sears and JC Penny. There is also a huge supermarket where, if tired of eating out, you can purchase fresh fruit and vegetables at reasonable prices.

**Mexican Cigars** have reached a high level of quality and are gaining prestigious reputations. Some are Cruz Real, Santa Clara, Las Aromas de San Andres, Te Amo, Ornelas and Monte Cristos. They range in price from $2.50 to $7 each. Kukulcan Plaza, Km 13 in the Hotel Zone has four tobacco shops. They are **Cigar's House**, **Elite Tobacco**, **Las Vegas del Tabaco** and **The Best Cigar**. Cuban cigars are considered contraband in the US and will be confiscated if found by customs when you are returning.

**Mercado 28**, SM 28 Downtown, Old Cancún, open 9 am to 10 pm daily, is filled with Mexican crafts from around the country. If you venture out of the Hotel Zone, be certain to visit the 100+ shops with prices far lower

than in the Hotel Zone. The restaurants are fun too. Once in Old Cancún, look for a bus with "Mercado 28" on it or take a taxi. The bus driver will point to the market for you as it is across the street and in from the road a bit.

If shipping goods back home, use a courier service, such as Redpack, ☎ 884-9860, Mulipack, ☎ 886-9712, Fedex, ☎ 800-900-1100, or Estafeta, ☎ 898-6002, local 06.

**El Tesoro de Kukulcan**, Kukulcan Plaza, ☎ 885-2999, sells, among other things, Talavera pottery, produced in Puebla State since 1550. Talavera is the finest art produced in this medium. All items are hand-painted, fired in special ovens for about 10 hours and then glazed and fired again for about 40 hours. The background color is white or oyster and the bottom is pink or terracotta. The bottom of the piece should have the artist's initial and the logo and location of the production house. The most impressive and useful item you can obtain is a Talavera sink – sunk into an antique stand, it will look splendid in any home. If this doesn't suit your fancy, try some tiles. They will go well anywhere.

*Talavera pottery*

**Joyerias Maraf**, at Qunta Av, Kukulcan, or in the malls of La Isla and Caracol, offers the discriminating shopper watches or jewelry by world-famous designers such as Jean Richard, Gerald Genta, Paul Picot, Maurice Lacroix and Bertolucci. You may even design your own piece with the help of in-store designers and a free glass of wine.

Natural Pearls form once in every 15,000 oysters. The mollusk secretes a protecting fluid that layers itself, taking up to six years to form a pearl. This makes the item expensive and, because they are naturally made, they are seldom perfect in shape or size. Cultured pearls, with the help of a technician who places a nucleus inside an oyster shell, take about two years to form. The shape is almost perfect and the colors varied.

# Hotels

There are over 28,000 hotel rooms along the 14 miles (22 km) of beach in the hotel zone and then another few thousand rooms in the city center. To find a hotel, you can book with an agent or take your chances on the Internet. My suggestion is to reserve a room for only a day or two and look around. However, if you want a high-end, all-inclusive place, take the advice of a friend or travel agent and be sure to read reviews on *Trip Advisor*. Also be aware that some on-line booking systems do not work. You will book, pay the bill and arrive to no room.

Many time-shares are a scam. Beware! Will you want to pay $20,000 plus about $800 per year upkeep and return to this same place year after year?

## Hotel Prices

Prices in Cancún, especially along the strip, are higher than most of Mexico so please note that the price scale reflects that difference.

| HOTEL PRICE CHART | |
|---|---|
| Cost per night for two before tax | |
| $ | Under $75 |
| $$ | $75-$150 |
| $$$ | $151-$225 |
| $$$$ | $226-$300 |
| $$$$$ | Over $300 |

## Airport Location

**Courtyard Marriott**, Blvd Luis Donaldo Colosio, Km 12.5, ☎ 287-2200, www.marriott.com/hotels/travel/cuncy-courtyard-cancún, $$/$$$, is five minutes from the airport and offers a free shuttle to downtown or the airport. This is a great place for those leaving very early in the morning or arriving late at night.

## Old Cancún

**Hotel Alux**, Av Uxmal #21, ☎ 803-2482 or 884-3046, www.hotelalux.com, $, is the pink building around the corner from the bus station. The moderately sized rooms are cleaned daily. There is air conditioning and cable TV. The staff is friendly and helpful. There is luggage storage and a good breakfast place next door. For this quality of room, you won't get a better deal in the city.

**Hotel/Hostel Tulum,** Av Tulum #21, ☎ 898-3142, $, located across Av Uxmal opposite the bus station. It has 56 beds in segregated dorms and 12 private rooms with bathrooms. The hostel is fairly new and well oper-

ated. There is a kitchen with cooking utensils, Internet access and a rooftop sitting area. Morning coffee is free. This is a good deal.

**The Nest**, Alcatraces #49 and Av Margaitas, ☎ 884-8967, $. The rooms are really tiny closets with bunks. The hostel is on a quiet street, near Palapa park. Air conditioning is extra but, without it, a room is not only claustrophobic, it is suffocating. I can't imagine the dorms without air conditioning. I must say though, it is spotlessly clean.

**Haina Hostel**, Av Yaxchilan #13, ☎ 898-2081, www.hainahostal.com, $, is a funky sort of place with five- or six-bed dorms or private rooms. Everyone has access to the kitchen but you don't have to make breakfast as it is included. There is a common room, storage facilities and Internet access. Air conditioning is available in the private rooms.

**Hotel Colonial**, Av Tulipanes #22, (just off Tulum), ☎ 884-1535, $, has 46 rooms, with those at the front being noisy. The rooms decorated in Spanish motif have king- or double-sized beds, and children under 12 are free. The entrance has a lovely colonial-style fountain. Also available are an Internet café, laundry service, and safe deposit boxes. Restaurants and bars are close by, as is the bus station.

**Maya Hostel**, Calle Margaritas #17, ☎ 892-0103, www.cancunhostel.com, $, has some tiny closets for rent along with dorm beds. Free Internet and breakfast, a book exchange and bike rental. They are often full.

**Cancún Rosa**, Margarita #2 is just half a block off the corner of Uxmal and Tulum, ☎ 884-2875, hcrosa@gmail.com, $$. This may be a half-decent hotel but some of the people working at the desk should be lab rats rather than dealing with the public. Also the 30 available rooms are overpriced for what you get. There is no remote, ants are popular guests and the advertised pool is usually not open.

**Hotel Sol y Luna**, Calle Alcatraces 33, ☎ 887-5579 or 887-5528, www.solylunahotel.com, $$, is a lovely little place with just 11 brand new, tastefully decorated rooms. The English-speaking manager is friendly and helpful. The rooms are comfortable, with king-sized beds, cable TVs, wireless Internet connections, air conditioning and mini bars. There is a pool in the yard and the entire place sparkles with cleanliness. It is a safe location across from a park and next to a restaurant.

*Hotel Kin Mayab*

**Hotel Kin Mayab**, Av Tulum #75, ☎ 884-2999, www.hotelkinmayab.com, $$, is a family-run Spanish-styled hotel that is clean and comfortable and across from some of the best restaurants in downtown Cancún. The 45 rooms are

tiled and have king/queen/double beds and air conditioning. There is a tiny pool and a tinier garden at the back. Parking is also available. They will give you a deal if staying more than one night.

**Hotel Caribe International**, Av. Yaxchilan and Sunyaxchen #36-37, ☎ 884-3999, $$, caters to the business traveler but it's a great deal for others too. The 80 standard rooms have air conditioning, tiled floors, large closets and cable TV. The reception people are friendly and helpful. The restaurant and bar are popular with guests and non-guests. There is laundry service, free parking, a large pool, pharmacy and a travel agent on premises. Safe deposit boxes are available. This is a fairly good deal.

**Soberanis Hostal**, Av Cobá between Calle 5 & 7, ☎ 884-4564, $$, is central but can be noisy. Rooms are small and nondescript, with air conditioning, hot water and cable TV. Continental breakfast is included. The only complaint I heard was that the air conditioning can be noisy. It is across from the hospital.

# Hotel Zone

## Lap of Luxury Hotels

The luxury places, often all-inclusive, usually have a couple of pools, air-conditioning, a spa, disco/bar and restaurants. The hotels are big, sometimes with more than 500 rooms. Some are time-shares and most are above average as far as hotels go, especially when it comes to entertainment activities. I've commented on a few specific features that are offered. Go to the websites for more information and booking. Also speak with your travel agent and other people whose standards you can trust.

*Ambiance Villas*

Prices vary according to time of year, hotel specials and tour operator deals. Once you find a place you think you might want, check *Trip Advisor* on the Internet to see what the latest reports are about your choice. However, that said, be sure to read a number of reports because some are jaded, some are placed by employees and some have expectations far beyond the services available in Mexico.

**Ambiance Villas**, Km 8.5, ☎ 891-5400, www.ambiancevillas.com/home.asp, $$$$, has fully furnished one- , two- and three-bedroom suites and one of the nicer beaches on the strip.

**Aquamarina Beach**, Km 4.5, ☎ 849-4606, www.aquamarinabeach.com, $$$, has mini golf and is wheelchair-accessible.

**Avalon Baccara**, Km 11.5, ☎ 881-3900, $$$$, has 83 stairs leading up to the reception but the pool is exceptional for its warmth, available chairs and bar service. This is a small hotel with just 27 rooms, some with kitchens and private Jacuzzis.

*Avalon Baccara*

**Barecelo Costa Cancún**, $$$$, Km 4.5, ☎ 849-7100, www.barcelo-costacancun.com, all-inclusive, 355 rooms. Very good for spring breakers. Only downside is the marina next door (oil on the water).

**Barcelo Tucancún**, Km 13.5, ☎891-5099, www.barcelo-tucancúnbeach.com, $$$, is an all-inclusive, with 332 rooms. It's an older hotel and, for the price, better deals can be gotten. The service, however, is superb.

**Beach Paradise**, Km 19.5, ☎ 885-2222, www.hotelurbeachparadise.com, $$$, is an all-you-can-drink-and-eat resort with a total of three bars and three restaurants.

**Bel Air**, Km 20.5, ☎ 885-2148, www.Cancun.com/hotels/bel_air_collection, $$$, is average in all-around quality.

*Best Western Clipper Club*

**Best Western C. Clipper Club**, Km 9, ☎ 891-5999, www.clipper.com.mx, $$$$, has a tennis court, jogging track, and air-conditioned exercise room. It's on the lagoon side and in the hub of restaurants, bars, and shopping malls. It's a budget place so there is no high quality spa.

**Blue Bay Getaway and Spa**, Km 3.5, ☎ 848-7900, www.all-inclusive-adult-bbgetaway.com, $$$, is an all-inclusive adults-only resort (no one under 21 years) that encourages guests to throw away inhibitions and party Cancún-style.

**Cancún Palace**, Km 14.5, ☎ 881-3600, www.palaceresorts.com/resorts/cancunpalace/index.asp, $$$$$, has 600 luxurious rooms, all with double

Jacuzzi baths. It's all-inclusive only and is considered by some as "high energy."

*Cancún Palace*

**Cancún Plaza**, Km 20.5, ☎ 885-0072, www.cancunplazacondos.com, $$$, is basic and offers rates by the month.

**Caribbean Princess**, Calle Galeon D9-5, ☎ 849-4470, www.thecaribbeanprincess.com, $$$, for the most part had very bad reviews by other travelers. I have never stayed here.

**Casa Maya**, Km 5.5, ☎ 881-0500, www.casamaya.com, is one of the oldest in Cancún. It is a timeshare or you can rent by the week.

**Club Carrousel**, Km 3.5 (overlooking Isla Mujeres), ☎ 848-7170, www.hotelcarrousel.com, $$$, is wheelchair-accessible.

**Club Med**, Puta Nizuc, ☎ 881-8200, $$$$$, has just spent $24 million on renovations for its 374 rooms. This is an all-inclusive resort specializing in family vacations.

**Club Verano Beat**, Km 3.5, ☎ 849-7428, www.club-verano-beat-cancun.com, $$, located on Isla Mujeres Bay. No beach.

**Condos Brisas**, Km 19.5, ☎ 885-0302, www.suitesbrisas.com, $$$, has one, two and three bedroom suites.

**Condos Carisa Y Palma**, Lot 10A Kukulcan, ☎ 883-0211, www.carisapalma.com, $$$, is small with just 122 rooms. Those on the lagoon side are very noisy.

**Condos Girasol**, Km 9.5, ☎ 883-5045, www.cancunsteve.com/puntacancún.html, $$, is a tiny condo/hotel that rents rooms by the day, week or month. There are less than 50 rooms, but it gets good reports.

**Condos Punta Cancún**, Km 8.5, ☎ 883-4596, www.puntacancuncondos.com, $$, is a new luxury complex with apartments for sale or rent that have up to four bedrooms/four bathrooms in each apartment. No smoking or pets. This is quite luxurious.

**Condo Salvia**, Km 9, ☎ 883-2286, www.salviacondo.com, $$, has 80 rooms in a hotel (rather than condos). Good deal.

**Condo Solymar**, Km 18.7, ☎ 885-1811, www.cancun-condos.net/solymarcancúnEng.htm, $$, is an all-inclusive that isn't highly rated. Best to just rent a room.

**Condo Terramar Plaza**, Km 8.5, ☎ 883-0364, www.cancunterramar.com/room-rates.html, $$, is basic and cheap. Rates as a condo because it has kitchen facilities.

**Crown Paradise Club**, Km 18.5, ☎ 848-9000, www.crownparadise.com/cancun/crown/index.html, $$$$$, luxurious and good for families.

*Crown Paradise Club*

**Dos Playas**, Km 6.5, ☎ 849-4920, www.dosplayas.com, $$, is budget and basic.

**Dreams Cancún Resort**, Punta Cancún, ☎ 848-7000, www.dreamsresorts.com/cancun, $$$$$, is a pyramid-shaped building with 379 rooms; all-inclusive accommodations are available.

**Elan Spa**, Km 3.5, ☎ 891-4080, www.elanresort.com/cancun-eng, $$$$$, has 250 suites, two pools and seven restaurants. This is an all-inclusive, adults-only villa done in Mexican motif.

**El Pueblito**, Km 17.5, ☎ 881-8800, www.pueblitohotels.com, $$$, gets mixed reviews but is more a party place for singles than a family hotel.

**Fiesta Americana Grand Coral Beach**, Km 9.5, ☎ 881-3200, www.hotels-cancun.com/fiesta-coralbeach, $$$$$, has over 600 exceptional rooms with service to match.

*Fiesta Americana Grand Coral Beach*

**Fiesta Americana Condesa**, Km 16.5, ☎ 881-4200, www.fiestamericana.com, $$$$$, has over 500 rooms. The restaurant food is good, the pool good, the beach so-so.

**Flamingo Cancún**, Km 11.5, ☎ 848-8870, www.flamingocancun.com, $$$, offers good rooms, questionable service.

*Fiesta Americana Condesa*

**Golden Parnassus**, Km 14.5, ☎ 848-7550, www.goldenparnassuscancun.com, $$$$, overall good adult hotel, except for the push for you to listen to a time-share presentation.

**Gran Melia Cancún**, Km 16.5, ☎ 881-1100, www.solmelia.com, $$$$$, has 678 newly renovated rooms and 50 suites. There is even a nine-hole golf course on site.

**Gran Caribe Real Cancún**, Km 11.5, ☎ 881-5500, www.grancaribecancun.com, $$$$$, has over 500 deluxe rooms and a good spa.

**Grand Oasis**, Km 16.5, ☎ 881-7000, www.oasishotels.com/english/hotels/grandoasis, $$$$$, is a pyramidal hotel set on 32 acres.

*Gran Caribe Real Cancún*

**Grand Oasis Playa**, Km 19.5, ☎ 891-5000, www.oasishotels.com, $$$$, is an all-inclusive adults-only resort that has gotten numerous bad reports.

**Grand Solaris Cancún**, Km 18, ☎ 848-8400, www.grsolaris.com, $$$$$, is an all-inclusive, family hotel with three pools plus a kid's pool.

**Hilton Cancún**, Km 17, ☎ 881-8000, www.hilton.com, $$$$$, is a golf and spa resort with standard, deluxe and villa executive accommodations.

**Holiday Inn Cancún**, Km 2.5, ☎ 849-8000, www.holidayinn.com, $$$$, offers good service, bad food, and rooms ranging from bad to good.

**Hyatt Cancún**, Km 8.5, ☎ 891-5555, www.hyatt.com, $$$$, 295 rooms, spa and watersports on site.

**Imperial Laguna**, Km 2.5, ☎ 883-3448, www.hotelimperialcancun.com, $$, is a budget hotel catering mostly to the young partier.

**Imperial Las Perlas**, Km 2.5, ☎ 849-4270, www.imperialcancun.com/lasperlas/description.htm, $$, is a budget hotel with budget services.

*Hyatt Cancún*

**Krystal**, Km 9, ☎ 8848-9800, www.nh-hotels.com/nhkrystalcancún, $$$$, is a timeshare that should be examined carefully before purchasing. Renting is OK.

**Laguna Verde**, Pok-ta-Pok #3, ☎ 883-3414, www.hotel-rates.com/mexico/cancun/hotel-suites-laguna-verde.html, $$$, is located on the lagoon and away from the party scene. It is small, cute and quiet.

**Le Blanc**, Km 10, ☎ 881-4740, www.leblancsparesort.com, $$$$$, has a superb spa. The hotel is generally considered one of the best.

*Infinity pool at Le Blanc*

**Le Meridien Resort**, Km 14, ☎ 881-2200, www.Cancun.com/hotels/le_meriden/, $$$$$, is good, but everything beyond the price of the room itself is extra and costly.

**Suites Marbella Cancún**, Km 4, ☎ 883-1712, www.cancun.hotelguide.net, has rooms with kitchenettes and balconies. The hotel is close to Sanborns, has three pools, and is on the beach.

**J.W. Marriott**, Km 14.5, ☎ 848-9600, www.marriott.com, $$$$$, except for the beach still needing work, is excellent.

**Maya Caribe**, Km 6, ☎ 849-4162, www.maya-caribe.com, $$, is a budget hotel.

*Me Cancún Melia*

**Me Cancún Melia**, Km 12, ☎ 881-2500, www.solmelia.com, $$$$$, is a 448-room exquisite family hotel.

**Oasis Palm Beach**, Km 5, ☎ 849-4510, $$$, www.oasispalm-beach.com, is an all-inclusive, family hotel with 471 rooms. They no longer accept student groups (for spring break especially). They offer a discount golf ticket for nine holes at the Grand Oasis, their sister hotel.

**Oasis Viva**, Km 8.5, ☎ 848-7600, www.Cancun.com/hotels/oasis_viva_Cancún, $$$$, is an all-inclusive resort with 210 rooms, excellent location, service and food. Good deal.

**Ocean Club**, Av Pok-ta-Pok #80, ☎ 883-3300, www.cancun-hotels/ocean_club_suites_cancún-hotel.html, $$$$, is across from the golf course, on the island in the lagoon.

**Park Royal Piramides**, Km 12.5, ☎ 885-1333, www.mexican.travel/cancun/park_royal_Cancún.php, $$$, is a time-share with numerous suites for sale or rent.

**Presidente Inter-Continental**, Km 7.5, ☎ 848-8700, www.intercontinental.com, $$$$$, is a family hotel, not a spa/resort.

**Ritz Carlton**, Retorno del Rey #6, ☎ 881-0808, www.ritzcarlton.com/en/properities/cancun, $$$$$, is of European design and highly recommended.

**Riu Cancún/Riu Palace las Americas**, Km 8.5, ☎ 848-7151, www.riu,com, $$$$$, are next door to each other and have almost 600 luxury rooms in each building, with all the amenities of a high-end resort.

*Riu Cancún*

**Royal Sunset**, Km 10, ☎ 881-4500, www.royalsunset.com, $$$$, is an all-inclusive timeshare. Beware if you are looking to buy, since most purchasers can't seem to get access to the rooms. Renters weren't much happier, since the service was terrible.

**Sotavento**, Km 4, ☎ 849-7642, www. www.cancun.com/hotels/sotavento_cancun, $$, is a good-deal for a budget hotel.

**Sina Quetzal #33**, ☎ 883-1017, www.cancunsinasuites.com.mx, $$$, is a quiet little place on the lagoon near the golf course. Good deal.

**Sunset Lagoon Resort and Yacht Club**, Km 5.8, ☎ 891-4500, www.sunsetlagoon.com, $$$, is on the lagoon side of the road and near the Maya ruins.

**View Mediterrando Hotel**, Km 4.5, ☎ 849-7745, $$$, has 80 rooms next to the channel that connects the lagoon with the Caribbean. The Colonial-styled rooms are clean and comfortable. It only books through agencies.

*Westin Resort & Spa*

**Villas Marlin**, Km 12.5, ☎ 885-2259, $$/$$$, www.villasmarlin.com, are very reasonably priced family-oriented villas.

**Westin Resort & Spa**, Km 20, ☎ 848-7400, www.westin.com/cancun, $$$$, has 300 rooms and everyone likes the pool.

# Restaurants

**La Tarola**, Av Yaxchilan and Sunyaxchen, ☎ 8883-9765, is a popular steak house that serves fresh grilled Argentinean beef steak and shish kabobs to perfection for about $8. It is my favorite downtown restaurant. The atmosphere is good, the service is better and the food is best. You must go early as there is often a line to get in after 7:30 pm.

**El Rincon**, Av Yaxchilan and Uxmal, ☎ 887-2358, offers a Cuban Creole buffet on Sunday at 1 pm, $7 for adults, $5 for children. They have live music shows Friday, Saturday and Sunday. There is no cover charge.

**Labna**, Margaritas #29, across from Las Palapas Park, ☎ 892-3056, www.labna.com, open 4 pm-2 am daily, is next to Cancún's most famous restaurant, La Habichuela. At Labna, the Queso Relleno ($10) ground pork, with Edam cheese, tomato, raisins, capers, almonds olives and spices covered with a red sauce, is a treat. But so are their appetizers, done in their famous lime sauce. For dessert, try the butterscotch and walnut crêpes.

**La Habichuela**, Margaritas #25, ☎ 884-3158, www.lahabichuela.com, is open daily from 6 pm to midnight. This was the home of the Pezzotti family. In 1977 they decided to make their residence a restaurant and it quickly became the prize-winning best in Mexico. For an elegant treat, book a table in the Maya garden, designed after Uxmal with flowering plants and native trees. Order the most famous dish, Cocobichuela, a coconut shell filled with curried lobster and shrimp poured over rice ($32) and topped with a slice of fresh pineapple. Although they serve beef and chicken, seafood is their specialty.

**The Club Sandwich**, Av Tulum #9 and Azucenas, ☎ 884-5762, www.clubsandwich.com, is open Tuesday to Sunday, 12 to 12. It has a Canadian motif, Canadian menu and good coffees. Some sandwiches ($4-$6 each), named after Canadian provinces, are good, although Canadian provinces don't have traditional sandwiches. Canadians prefer donuts! But the bread is fresh and made with little or no preservatives.

*The Club Sandwich*

The flavored coffees and frapuccinos ($3.50 each) are the best in Cancún.

*Le Basilic*

**Le Basilic,** Km 9.5, in the Fiesta Americana Grand Coral Hotel, ☎ 881-3200, is open 6-11 pm daily. This is an elegant, high-end Mediterranean restaurant heavily influenced by French cuisine. Foods like duck leg in orange sauce or cracked pepper filet melt in your mouth and leave a wonderful aftertaste that lasts for days. Music from the white grand piano filters through the room unnoticed.

**Che Futbol,** Av Tulum #75, ☎ 884-8865, specializes in Argentinean beef steaks and shish kabobs and wines – definitely a long way up the gourmet ladder from Mexican beef or wine. They also have a children's menu.

**Thai Lounge**, Km 12.5, ☎ 883-1401, is located in La Isla Mall. The restaurant overlooks the aquarium and its dolphins. The atmosphere is serene, the service attentive. Typical foods of Thailand such as peanut satay, Thai salad or spicy chicken are excellent, although a bit pricey (+$10).

**Casa Rolandi**, Km 8.5, ☎ 883-2557, offers exquisitely prepared Italian food with my favorite being the four-cheese gnocchi. Washed down with a bottle of good red wine that eliminates any cholesterol from the gnocchi, it leaves you feeling full and virtuous. Plan on spending about $20 per person.

**Dragon Lady Chinese Food**, Km 13.5, ☎ 885-3056, is an eat-in or order-out, rather inexpensive restaurant with decent fusion Chinese foods ($5-$8 per dish).

Along the strip, there are also Captain's Cove, Chili's (Tex-Mex), Dady Rock, Hooters, Hard Rock, KFC, Pizza Hut, Pat O'Brien's, Subway and other North American franchises. Or why not try Bubba Gump? With a name like that the food would have to be equally as creative. Sadly, I have not tried it yet.

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# Isla Mujeres

The island of women has been transformed from a sleepy little outback to a bustling resort area with about 5,000 residents. The five miles of beach are still clean, the hustle still low. The most popular mode of transportation is the golf cart or motor scooter.

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## History

In 1517 Fernandez de Cordoba found a sanctuary here with women worshipping the Moon Goddess Ixchel, who is also responsible for fertility. When he spoke of the island, he called it the island of women and the name stuck.

Pirates also found the island and some brought women to live in their haciendas. Mundaca is one such pirate whose house can still be visited. Captain Lafitte, another patron of the island, preferred the name privateer to pirate. He organized the lawless buccaneers of the area so they could "obtain" goods from enemy ships and sell them at proper prices throughout America's south.

By the mid-1800s the pirates had left and about

*Beach on Isla Mujeres (Tbachner)*

250 fishermen, mostly Maya, lived on the island, trying to escape the horrors of the Caste War.

The isolation allowed for a quiet life until the early 1950s when the first hotel was built and Mexican vacationers, mostly from Mérida, came to enjoy the sand, sun and seafood. Word spread and by the 1970s every hippy on the gringo trail stopped in for a few weeks or months. Soon 30 hotels rimmed the edges of the blue waters.

The laid-back nature of the island was rapidly transformed when those partying at Cancún became bored with the same disco or bar night-after-night. Now, half-burned-out partiers try to continue the festivities in the newer setting of Isla.

# Orientation

The island is a mere .3 mile (.5 km) wide and less than five miles (eight km) long. Although car rentals are possible, walking or renting a motor scooter/golf cart is the easiest way to get around. The main town and Zocalo, or Central Plaza, are at the north end of the island, the lighthouse and Garrafon park are at the south. Just southwest of the Zocalo is the port and customs office where most tourists arrive.

The island is rimmed with white sand, and the town is stacked with bars, restaurants, hotels and tour operators. Just laying on the beach, renting an umbrella and sipping a margarita is a relaxing treat after the bustle of Cancún.

At the center-western part of the island is **Lagoona Makax**, where dolphins eagerly await tourists, not because they love tourists, but because they are usually rewarded for their antics with food. The park is considered a must for nature lovers.

# Getting Here & Around

Take a local bus from Cancún to Puerto Juárez, where a ferry costing $3 leaves every half-hour for the island from 6 am until 11 pm daily. If you don't want to wait for a ferry, private boats can be hired for twice the price of the ferry. If you want them to take you snorkeling (assuming you have your own gear) the cost for half a day is $25-$45.

A Car Ferry leaves from Punta Sam daily at 8 and 11 am or 5:30 and 8:15 pm. It returns at 6:30 and 9:30 am, 12:45, 2:45, and 5:15 pm.

You can rent an electric golf cart and circle the island in a couple of hours if you don't stop. Heading south, you will pass the navel base and then come to the turtle farm. Just beyond the turtle farm is a restaurant where you can have your photo taken with a nurse shark held captive in a small

holding tank. Finally, at the south end of the island you'll find Garrafon Park, beyond which is Punta Sur and the lighthouse, park and ruin.

Continuing, the east side of the island is dotted with luxurious and elegant homes. The most photographed of them all is a white conch shell home with the opening of the conch being the entrance and balcony. The north end of the island has a lovely beach. Touring on an electric cart along the south end of the island should take no more than two hours providing you don't stop much to explore.

Be certain to have your cart back on time or you will be charged an extra hour. No leeway is given.

A taxi will cost about $3 to the end of the island but may be difficult to find for the return trip. Garrafon del Castilla, next to the park, has a taxi service available.

# What to See & Do

**The Turtle Farm**, Carretera Sac Bajo, Km 5, ☎ 877-0595, www.turtlefarm.com.mx. Open 9 am-5 pm, $2 entry fee (most goes to the farm's upkeep). There are numerous pens holding sea turtles in different stages of development. Staff feeds the turtles and informs visitors how the turtles lay their eggs, and then where and what happens after that. School children set the young turtles free when they are big enough to fend for themselves. Nesting occurs from May to September and hatching is six weeks later. Mexico was once famous for its poaching of turtles; the Turtle Farm is a great step in the right direction as it teaches youngsters the importance of conservation.

*Sea Turtle Farm (Zachsg)*

**Garrafon National Park,** Km 6, Garrafon Highway, ☎ 884-9420, www.garrafon.com, at the south end of Isla Mujeres, is open daily 8 am-5 pm. Entry fee is $16 per person. If going by tour from Cancún, the basic all-inclusive cost is $60 for adults and $45 for kids to enter and enjoy. If you wish to swim with dolphins, add another $150 per person. Snorkel gear is extra.

*Garrafon National Park (Thomas More Travel)*

There are toilets, a restaurant, showers, lockers, souvenir shops and a first aid facility at the information center. Lockers, food, snorkel gear, and kayaks are extra. Actually, the only thing not extra is the salt air, but they're working on pricing that too.

One can snorkel, swim in the pool, kayak or take a bike tour. Climbing the observation tower and then swinging over the ocean on a zip-line is popular. There are parrots along the nature path and some caves and cliffs near the water.

The Royal Swim can be booked at the entrance gate to the park or by taking a tour from Cancún, which you can arrange at any hotel in the hotel zone. These tours run about $50 more per person. The minimum age is eight years and a swim takes one hour. You will hug, kiss, and be towed and pushed by a dolphin for a mere $150. The Swim Adventure gives you a handshake, hug, kiss and belly ride with a dolphin and will take 45 minutes at a cost of $100. Finally the Dolphin Encounter will take kids as young as one year for a 45-minute event where they get a handshake, hug, kiss and listen to the dolphins sing a song. The cost for adults is $70 and for kids, $60.

All encounters will be professionally filmed and photographed. These souvenir images are available for a price.

I'm against intruding on wildlife, whether it's photographing to closely or touching or penning. If you must visit these animals, be certain you have no sunscreen or insect repellent on your skin before entering the water. Those chemicals are lethal to wildlife. Keep your movements calm, since unexpected moves cause stress in the animals.

The impact of penned dolphins on the surrounding water is that there is an excess of algae growth caused from their excretions. This in turn results in coral damage and death. A dolphin excretes six times the amount that a human does in a day. For me, seeing the dolphins in their natural environment, in the open waters, is far more thrilling than swimming in a pen with them. Taking a sea kayak to watch them is environmentally sound and far less expensive. It may be time to leave this "attraction," and by that I mean the entire park, to the locals.

**Garrafon de Castilla**, Punta Sur, ☎ 877-0107, www.garrafon-beach-club.mysila.com, next door to the park, is as good as the park for snorkeling, swimming and sun. The cover charge is $3 per person. There is a bar and snack shack, souvenir shop with traditional Mexican crafts and clothing, and private gardens. This is also a hotel. If staying here, there is no charge to use the facilities.

## Contoy Island

This little bird sanctuary, home to over 100 species, is just 45 minutes north of Isla Mujeres and should not be missed by bird enthusiasts. Large flocks of figates, pelicans and cranes use the island for nesting.

The park, established in 1961, includes the entire island, which is just 50 feet wide and four miles long. There is an observation tower and a small museum.

*Contoy Island*

This tour should be booked in advance because visiting restrictions are in place. Tours from Cancún are no longer permitted. The cost is $35 per person and it will take most of the day, although part of the day will be dedicated to snorkeling. Purchase tickets at the Isla Contoy office, Calle Madero, across from La Reina Bakery. All tours leave at 9 am. This tour is recommended over Garrafon Park.

## Park of Sculptures

Located at Punta Sur, the park and ruins are open from 9 am to 5 pm and cost $3 to enter. The park has 23 original works done by international artists. Mexico's famous artist, José Luis Cuevas, has a piece here. Templo Maya a la Diosa Ixchel, the ruins of the temple dedicated to Ixchel, the moon goddess, are here although not much is left. When the pirates found the ruin they quickly relieved it of its gold treasures. I'm not sure what they did with the women who worshipped here. A tiny ruin built on

*Park of Sculptures*

the highest point of land doesn't take much time or effort to visit. The natural arch beneath the ruins was destroyed by hurricane winds and retouched with cement. Just before the temple is the lighthouse/museum. The lighthouse was built in 1931 and is 100 feet (33 m) high with a round concrete tower.

## Mundaca's Hacienda

This is the old home of buccaneer Antonio de Mundaca y Marechega who fell in love with a local beauty but she fell in love with another guy. No matter what Mundaca did, he couldn't convince the beauty to turn her eye to him. Mundaca slowly went mad and committed suicide. Parts of the hacienda can be seen but it's the tropical gardens containing a small zoo that make it worth the stop.

## La Gloria English School

At ☎ 888-0666, www.folges.org, this is a non-profit organization looking for volunteers to help Maya people learn English that in turn should help them get jobs. Your job would be to listen and interact with students. To participate, you must choose a time to visit (see their website), and then let the school know exactly when you will be there and how often you will visit. No photos are permitted. If you wish to support the school you can contribute financially, offer good used clothing, school and office supplies, or small gifts such as toys and games. They also need computers. If you have donations and can't make it to the school, you can drop them off at a few places in town. Call and they will tell you the closest place where you can deliver gifts.

## Tour Operators

There are numerous dive shops on Isla. I have recommended just two, both with good reputations. But guides change and move on. Ask around and talk to a number of operators before making a decision. Both companies are PADI certified and offer certification courses, night dives and cenote dives.

**Delfin Diving**, North Beach in front of Hotel Na Alamos, ☎ 877-0305, www.delfindiving.com, has diving tours from $55 for a one-tank night dive to $100 for a two-tank wreck dive. They take only four or five divers at a time. Talk to Cindi about what you want and she'll try to fix you up.

**Coral Dive Center**, Av Hidalgo, ☎ 877-0061, has been in business since 1981 and their reputation has constantly grown. They have about 30 dive sites from which to choose so you are sure to get what you want.

### RENTALS

There are lots of rental places for carts, scooters and bikes. Bartering and bargain finding depends on the time of year; supply and demand rules.

**Rentadora Gomar II**, Madero #65, ☎ 887-0604, has scooters for $25-$35 per day, gas extra, and bicycles for $8-$12 a day.

**Cardenas Rentadora**, Av Guerrero, ☎ 877-0079, has been recommended by a number of travelers as a reasonable place to deal with. Their service is excellent.

**Pepe's Rentals**, Hidalgo 19, ☎ 887-0019, has a good reputation and prices comparable to other places for golf carts.

## Nightlife

**Hidalgo Street** is where the nightlife is. Bars such as **Kokonuts** that have live entertainment are popular. **Buho's** on North Beach in front of Cabañas Maria del Mar is the "swingers bar" and **Jax Bar and Grill** (great burgers) is known to the romantic sunset watchers. Many of the less expensive hotels along North Beach allow the partiers from Cancún to come over for a day or so.

## Shopping

Isla Mujeres is noted for its silver jewelry and its hammocks. A good hammock runs between $15 and $25. Silver runs as high or low as you wish. Prices in general are comparable to Cancún. Here you will find some things cheaper but others more expensive. Some bartering is expected.

**Van Cleef & Arpels**, Av Juárez and Morelos, ☎ 877-0331, has upscale designer silver with semiprecious stones and even higher quality items in gold with precious stones. Be prepared

*The main shopping street*

to spend and then get the best. Those without tons of dollars can still stop in to dream.

Sterling silver is made from 92.5% silver and 7.5% copper. To test its purity, add a drop of nitric acid (though you have trouble getting that while traveling). If the metal turns green it is not pure but if it becomes creamy, it is high quality. Silver made for international trade must have "925" stamped on it.

**Martin Good Gallery**, end of El Garrafon, has paintings by famous Mexican painters such as Enrique Ferreol. There are also wood and metal sculptures for those wanting a unique, high-quality souvenir.

**Poco Loco**, Av Rueda Medina, ☎ 887-0140. For fun shopping this is the place. As the name suggests, it's a little crazy. They specialize in beach clothing, things you'd wear here but that, once you got home, you'd hide them at the bottom of your drawer.

# Hotels

There are lots of hotels. Some are noisy, some beyond luxury. Do not book for an entire vacation, just in case you find something a bit more to your liking.

| HOTEL PRICE CHART | |
|---|---|
| Cost per night for two before tax | |
| $ | Under $50 |
| $$ | $51-$100 |
| $$$ | $101-$175 |
| $$$$ | $176-$250 |
| $$$$$ | Over $250 |

**Perla del Caribe**, Calle Medero #9 and Av Francisco, www.perla-del-caribe.islamujeres.com, $, gets good and bad reports. It is a white concrete box with 40 rooms on the beach.

**Hotel El Caracol**, Matamoros #5, ☎ 877-0150, www.isla-mujetes.net/hotelcaracol, $, has clean rooms and a communal kitchen, two blocks from Playa Norte. At time of writing it was for sale.

**Hotel Marcianito**, Abasolo #10, between Juárez and Hidalgo, ☎ 887-0111, www.isla-mujeres.net/hotel/marcianito, $, is in the center of town but has no air conditioning.

**Hotel Isleño**, Madero #8, ☎ 877-0302, $, is downtown and just 10 minutes walk to Playa Norte. It is old and basic.

**Hotel Bucaneros,** Av Hidalgo #11, ☎ 877-0126, www.bucaneros.com, $$, has rooms with kitchenettes and is a great budget place, just minutes from the beach. Breakfast is included. There is a restaurant on site.

**Hotel Roca Mar**, Calle Nicolas Bravo Y Zona Maritima, ☎ 877-0101, www.isla-mujeres.net/hotelrocamar/, $$, is on the water, and offers a pool, balconies, fans, and a restaurant.

*Terrace at Roca Mar*

**Posada del Mar**, Av Rueda Medina #15-A, ☎ 877-0044, $$, has rooms with balconies or patios. Children under 12 are free (max two). There is a poolside bar and the hotel is a block from town center. Due to many returning guests reservations are recommended.

**Villa Kiin**, Riito Beach just south east of North Beach, ☎ 877-0045, $$, has 10 bungalows and a dozen rooms fronting 320 feet (100 m) of private beach. The gardens are dotted with hammocks and lounge chairs.

**Hotel Belmar**, Av Hidalgo #110, ☎ 877-0430, www.rolandi.com/bel_hotfeat.htm, $$, is decorated in old hacienda style, making it funky and attractive. Balcony and Jacuzzi bath in the room. This is a real deal.

*Hotel Secreto*

**Hotel Secreto**, Seccion Rocas, ☎ 877-1039, www.hotelsecreto.com, $$$$, is a tiny, privately owned boutique hotel on North Beach, five minutes from downtown. The pool hovers over the ocean, providing the illusion that you're swimming in the Caribbean. This "secret" place is recommended.

**Ixchel Beach Hotel**, Playa Norte, ☎ 999-2010, www.ixchelbeachhotel.com, $$$$, has well over 200 family-oriented rooms on the beach. There is a baby-sitting service and a tour office to help arrange daytime events such as fishing or diving.

*Casa de los Sueños*

**Hotel Villa Rolandi**, Laguna Mar SM 7, ☎ 999-2052, www.villarolandi.com, $$$$$, lies between the Lagoon and the north side of the island. There is a yacht pier, and a spa offering Thalasso therapy, Reiki, wrappings and scrubs and more. The luxurious rooms are Mexican/Mediterranean style.

**Casa de los Sueños**, Car. Garrafon, #9, ☎ 877-0651, $$$$$, is a high-end, adults-only, clothes-optional resort. Their spa offers all possible body envelopments and massages in as many tropical flavors.

*Hotel Villa Rolandi*

# Restaurants

There are more restaurants than hotels. Go where the crowd is; an empty restaurant could be a bad sign.

**El Balcon de Arriba**, Av Hidalgo #12, ☎ 877-1333, open 8 am-11 pm, is upstairs and has a rooftop seating area. It has great red snapper done in a Yucatán sauce for about $10. If that isn't to your liking, they also cook the best seafood soup on the island.

**Café El Nopalito**, Av Guerrero #70, ☎ 877-0555, open 8 am to 6 pm, serves vegetarian foods and is famous for its homemade bread. The restaurant is very popular for breakfast and lunch.

**La Bohemia**, Av. Hidalgo and Abasolo (no phone number available), is best for lunch or dinner and dessert. The menu and presentation is French. Chicken breast served with curry sauce or grilled steak with thyme sauce are not to be missed. Word is that they may have closed, however! How dreadul!

**Café Cito**, Av Matamoros and Juárez, ☎ 877-1470, open 8 am to 8 pm daily, is a popular breakfast place. Waffles, I'm told are the best, but others

swear by the eggs, bacon and avacado ($5). This is one of the island's first cafés.

**La Cazuela M & J**, Av Bravo next to Hotel Roca Mar, ☎ 877-0101, open 7 am to 2 pm except Mondays, www.isla-mujeres.net, has patios at the front and back. Their specialty dish, La Cazuela ($6), is between an omelet and a soufflé. The omelet section of the soufflé can be flavored and spiced with anything you wish. On their website they offer a 20% discount coupon. This restaurant is an adventure.

*La Cazuela*

**Pizza Rolandi**, Av Hidalgo #110, ☎ 877-0429, www.rolandi.com, is famous for its pizzas and garlic bread cooked in a wood-burning stove. They also serve good Italian ice cream.

**La Peña**, Av Guerrero, ☎ 845-7384. Happy hour (that includes coffee!) starts at 7:30 pm and they stay open until around 3 am. The appetizers served with drinks are excellent. There is a courtyard restaurant on the premises and a movie lounge that shows American movies.

**Brisa Mexicana**, Av Hidalgo and Matamoros, ☎ 877-0372, is a colorful restaurant with lush plants as their main décor. The camaron con salsa de tequila ($10), is small but delicious.

*Dishes at Bamboo*

**The Bamboo**, Plaza Los Almendros #4, ☎ 877-1355, open from 11 am to 10 pm daily, has an all-day happy hour. Thai food, the best on the island, is the specialty, served with a mojito, also the best on the island, can be purchased for less than $15. Some evenings they have live entertainment.

**Aluxes Coffee House**, Av Matamoros (across from the bookstore), ☎ 877-1317, opens at 6:30 am and remains open until well after dinner. This very popular café is off the main streets so it's quiet. They squeeze their own orange juice ($1.50), serve exotic teas, bake their own cookies, breads and pastries – try their Triple Fudge Turtle Brownies ($4).

*Aluxes Coffee House*

# Holbox

Holbox is a white sand island 15 miles (25 km) long and .6 mile (one km) wide, nestled in the Yalahua Lagoon and bordered by the Gulf of Mexico. There are about 1,500 permanent residents, mostly fishermen and their families living in small wooden houses on the island. With no roads, there are no cars; walking, cycling, golf carts and motorbikes are the only ways to get around.

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Holbox hasn't been discovered by the Cancún party crowd, although it is patronized frequently by Europeans and North Americans who prefer the quiet side of life, along with flocks of flamingos who find the seaweed in the lagoon delicious. The island remains tranquil, even on Saturday night. Holbox is also part of the Yum Balam Reserve.

## History

*Holbox*

There isn't much history to the island. It was used by the Maya before the conquest. They called it the "black hole," because of the lagoon at the southern end.

The Spanish used it for the coconut industry and the only remnants of that era are the locals serving drinks mixed with coconut milk. When the coconut plantations died, fishing took over and now tourism is beginning to make its mark. However, when the progressive governor of the state decided to pave the roads, he was quickly marched out of town with an unwelcome sign. This indicates their attitude toward "progress."

## Orientation

Holbox, with mangroves and lagoons, is divided into three sections by rivers. Only the southern section is inhabited by humans. Otherwise, the island is a wildlife preserve.

Although there are an adequate number of hotels and restaurants and a few shops and tour operators, you should bring a thick book when you come as lying on the beach is the most popular pastime. Plan on resting.

There are no banks or ATMs; cash in the form of US dollars and Mexican pesos is the only medium of exchange. You can't even withdraw from your Visa account. One money-managing practice is to use a credit card at your hotel – check first to make certain they take credit cards – and charge your restaurant meals and purchases to your hotel. They in turn will give you one bill for everything, adding a 5% commission.

The only downside to visiting the island is the excessive amount of mosquito repellent you must bring and use. Only an ocean breeze will keep them at bay. The shops sell souvenir t-shirts attesting to the ferocity of these creatures.

## Getting Here

The closest village on the mainland is **Chiquila**, from where the ferry departs. Chiquila is about three hours from Cancún. A shuttle is available from Cancún bus station, leaving at 7:30 am and 12:30 pm

*Ferry to Holbox*

*Holbox taxi*

daily and costing about $6 per person. If driving, turn north 48 miles (80 km) after leaving Cancún along Highway 180 east. There is a sign indicating Chiquila. Total driving time is about 2½ hours.

The ferry leaves daily at 6, 8, 10 am and noon, 2, 5 and 12 pm.

Taxis are available on the island – they are four- , six- and eight-passenger golf carts that go everywhere and cost about $1.50 per mile.

# What to See & Do

## The Five Esses

Swim, snorkel, suntan, sleep and sunsets. No guides or pesos necessary.

## Fishing

Local fishermen will take you to Cabo Catoch, where the Caribbean and Gulf currents meet, as do all the fish. The catches are phenomenal. Tarpon, snook, snapper and barracuda are the most popular. But there is also permit, the most difficult fish to get, if you're trying for the grand slam.

Although these fish can be caught all year, the following months are your best bets:
**Tarpon** from May through September.
**Bonefish** from April through August.
**Permit** from May through August.
**Snook** from May through September.
**Barracuda** from April through September.
**Snapper** are available in June.

Lagoon fishing will reward you with mackerel, jewfish, grouper and sea trout.

# Wildlife Spotting

There are about 150 species of birds that frequent the island, including flamingos, herons, ibis, cormorants and pelicans. Walk to the south side of the island along the lagoon and watch for dolphins. Many hotels offer kayaks or canoes for paddling through the mangroves and night tours in search of crocs.

Whale shark spotting is big during August. Because of the water/food conditions, you are guaranteed to see one if you are here during that time.

*Isla Pajaros*

# Island Tours

*Isla Pajaros lookout towers*

**Isla Pajaros** is in the lagoon and half an hour from Holbox. There are two lookout towers from which to spot birds such as herons, figates, gaviotas, ducks, comachos, garzons, pink spatulas, ibis, and pelicans (just to name a few). **Isla Pasion** is a tiny island that has mangroves and birds. **Ojo de Agua** is nine miles (15 km) from Holbox and is a freshwater swimming spot surrounded by lush vegetation.

## Tour Operators

**Cholenco Tours**, ☎ 875-2033, www.cholencotours.com (Spanish only) is run by Captain Cholenco who specializes in deep sea fishing and diving tours. He's a local and knows the best spots. A boat for a day, with five or so people, will cost about $300. Diving is $100 for a two-tank dive.

**Holbox Monkeys**, Av Juárez, ☎ 875-2029, offers food, golf carts and boat tours. Talk about diversifying! Carts cost $8 per hour or $50 for 24 hours. A motorbike costs $8 per hour or $40 for 24 hours. A boat for touring is $150 for four hours and up to six people; fishing is $350 for six people for six hours. Monkeys has a good reputation. Their shop, open from 6 am to midnight, sells booze, snacks, meats and cheeses and some packaged goods.

**Holbox Tours**, ☎ 875-2173, www.holboxwhalesharktours.com, specializes in the summer whale shark run and charges about $100. You will also see rays, dolphins and sharks on this run. This family has been on the island for 150 years so all the secret fish areas are well known to them. They do dive tours also.

# Hotels

There are numerous hotels to choose from, and these are just a few. Most are middle range in price and comfort.

| HOTEL PRICE CHART | |
|---|---|
| Cost per night for two before tax | |
| $ | Under $50 |
| $$ | $51-$100 |
| $$$ | $101-$175 |
| $$$$ | $176-$250 |
| $$$$$ | Over $250 |

**Ida y Vuelta Hostel/Camping**, Calle Plutarco Elias between Robalo and Chacchi, ☎ 875-2358, $12 for camping and $40 for a cabaña, www.hostel-traveler.com/directory/mexico. There are washing facilities and a communal kitchen for guests. Rustic and inexpensive, the hostel also has the Tiki Tiki Bar on site.

*Casa Las Tortugas*

**Mawimbi**, Playa Norte, ☎ 875-2003, www.mawimbi.net, $/$$, features rustic cabins on North Beach. The surroundings demand relaxation. This is a great deal.

**Esmeralda**, North Beach, ☎ 847-5620, $$/$$$, have four-plex thatch roofed cabañas built beside the ocean, eight with fans, eight with air conditioning.

**Casa Las Tortugas**, Av Damero and Calle Sierra, ☎ 875-2129, www.holboxcasalastortugas.com, $$/$$$, has funky rooms, suites and beach bungalows with thatch roofs. All beds have mossie nets and most rooms have a

balcony or patio. They offer 10% discount for stays over a week and have a minimum stay of three nights.

**Villa Paraiso del Mar,** Av Plutarco Elias and Calle S/N, ☎ 875-2077, www.hmhoteles.net, $$$, has 36 rooms with hardwood floors, tons of tile and air conditioning. There is a pool and bar. Massage and aromatherapy are available as well as bike and cart rentals. You can also take kite surfing lessons or go fishing with a local, which can be booked through here.

**Villas Delfines**, ☎ 875-2167, $$/$$$$, www.holbox.com, has thatch-roof bungalows on the beach, surrounded by water. You must have a boat to reach the resort but for those wanting an exotic, quiet vacation, this will satisfy all your expectations. Included in the price are games, kayaks and horses.

*Villa Delfines*

**Hotel Faro Viejo**, Av Juárez Y Playa S/N, ☎ 875-2217, www.faroviejoholbox.com, $$$/$$$$, has rooms and suites for families. The rooms have Mexican décor with heavy wooden furniture, tiled floors and modern conveniences. There is a popular restaurant on site.

*Xaloc Resort*

**Xaloc Resort,** Calle Chacchi and Playa Norte, ☎ 875-2160, $$$/$$$$, has 18 comfortable rooms, two pools and a restaurant. There is a beach bar and game room. This resort is operated by two Spaniards, originally from Mallorca. Everyone who stays here loves it.

**Casa Casandra**, ☎ 875-2171, www.casandra.com, $$$$$, has a spa offering massages ($70/hr), reflexology ($45/hr), lymphatic drainage ($80/hr), shiatsu ($85/hr) and reiki ($25 for 20 minutes). There is a traditional restaurant and snack bar. This is a first rate resort.

# Restaurants

Most places in Holbox are casual, geared to shorts and t-shirts. Order a drink and enjoy the wait. If you're in a hurry, this may not be the island for you.

**La Cueva del Pirata**, on the main Plaza, ☎ 875-2183, is a family-run Italian restaurant serving the best Italian food. It's a favorite with foreigners.

**Evelyn Restaurant** is on the main Plaza, ☎ 875-2024, and lobster pizza is the dish of the day. There's an upstairs patio where you catch the breezes. Prices are quite low.

**Viva Zapata**, ☎ 875-2330, opens at 7 pm. It is the double-decker palapa half a block from the Plaza. Viva is a great drink place with Mexican appetizers and Mexican entertainment. The **Tiki Tiki Bar**, at the hostel/campsite (see page 198), opens from 10 am to 8 pm daily, and has spectacular Flamenco dancing exhibitions on weekends. This is a must!

**Zarabanda**, ☎ 875-2194, just one block from the Plaza, has lots of seafood, with ceviche being near the top of the list. During lobster season, it often outsells the civiche – a moderate tail costs less than $20. They are open from 8 am to 10 pm daily. This is a typical Mexican-island place to eat.

*Houses on Isla Holbox*

# Riviera Maya

The 240-mile (380-km) strip of land south of Cancún is called the Riviera Maya. This includes tourist draws such as Puerto Morelos, Playa del Carmen, Xcaret, Cozumel, Pureto Aventuras, Akumal, Xel-Há and finally Tulum. There are numerous hotels, resorts and spas of every class from grass shacks and see-through huts on the beach to six-star, luxury spas that cost over $500 a day. Playa del Carmen is a bustle while Cozumel, when the cruise ships are gone, is calm. Tulum is buzzing in the day and quiet at night. For the visitor, there are beaches, archeological sites, caves and cenotes to visit. There is great fishing, snorkeling, diving and swimming anywhere along the coast. Eating and drinking yourself into a heart attack would be easy, given the gourmet restaurants and eateries. The Riviera Maya is enjoyed by every culture in the world.

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- **Xpu-Há** 253


## Getting Here

If arriving at the Cancún International Airport, after passing customs, you can rent a car, hop on a local bus or take a tour.

If arriving by bus from Belize, you will find Mexican customs will give most visitors a three-month visa and some a six-month one. It's Belize customs that are often unpleasant, especially if you are just passing through on your way to Tikal. Belize charges everyone a $30 "Conservation Fee" every time they leave the country. Belize customs officers have been known to refuse to issue a 30-day visa (to which you are entitled) and the only way to get a full visa is to pay another $25 in Belmopan.

Riviera Maya
Punta Sam
ISLA MUJERES
Puerto Juárez
CANCUN
to Mérida, Chichén Itzá & Valladolid
180
LIBRE/TOLL-FREE HIGHWAY
CUOTA/TOLL HIGHWAY
180D
N
HUNTER PUBLISHING
307
CONVENT ROUTE
Puerto Morales
Playa del Carmen
Xcaret
Xpu-ha
Paa Mul
Puerto Aventuras
Akumal
Yalku Lagoon
San Miguel
to Cobá
Xcacel
Xel-Há
Tancah
Tulum
ISLA COZUMEL
307
SIAN KA'AN BIOSPHERE RESERVE
Boca Paila
Punta Allen
Caribbean Sea
to Chetumal
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*Puerto Morelos*

There are no Mexican buses running into Belize so your first point of access to transportation is at Chetumal, where buses leave every hour for Cancún from 6 am until about 7 pm.

# Puerto Morelos

This tiny fishing village, just 18 miles (30 km) south of Cancún, is still a quiet getaway. How it has escaped the hustle of Cancún is a miracle; its main draw is the car ferry to Cozumel that departs daily.

## What to See & Do

**Crococun Zoo**, Km 31 south of Cancún, three km before Puerto Morelos, ☎ 850-3719, www.crococun-zoo.com, $18 for adults, $12 for children, open 8 am to 5 pm daily, is a sophisticated petting zoo where guests can feed monkeys, hold snakes, pat deer and walk near crocodiles.

*Meeting a monkey at Crococun Zoo*

**Dr Alfredo Barrera Marin Botanical Garden**, Km 36, Cancún-Chetumal Highway, south of Puerto Morelos, open 8 am to 4 pm, entry fee $7, can be reached by taxi from the port. The 150 acres have a lookout tower from which you can

observe some of the 200 species of birds said to inhabit the area. While walking along the two-three miles (three-four km) of trails to the Chiclero camp where chewing gum was once produced, you can visit Maya ruins, with some artifacts, and see butterflies, spider monkeys, lizards, snakes, squirrels and iguanas. Dr. Alfredo Barrera Marin, a botanist, believes there are 250 species of animals living in the surrounding vegetation. The plant life, some of it labeled in English, Spanish and Latin, consists of numerous species of trees, shrubs, and flowering and medicinal plants. There is a remarkable orchid, bromeliad and fern garden. Wear walking shoes and bring water and insect repellent.

**Central Vallarta** is a tiny village beyond the Polo Club but the birding here for serious birders is excellent. You will see long-billed gnat wrens, trogons, ant shrikes and three species of humming birds, to name just a few.

## On Horseback

**El Rey Polo Country Club**, 6.3 miles (11 km) west of Puerto Morelos along the Ruta de los Cenotes, 1☎85-4122, www.elreypolocountryclub.com. For a game of polo call Eduardo Barena, ☎ 874-1385. A game costs $60 for green fees for four to six chukkers, $60 for 15 minutes horse rental, $40 green fee for stick and ball sessions and $100 for a polo lesson. The club has lockers, washrooms, restaurant/bar, children's playground, stables, beach club, and polo field. Polo season is from November to the end of June. If this is your thing, you can rent a four- to seven-bedroom villa for around $7,200 per night, including staff. That works out to $300 an hour. Horses for rent to ride for pleasure cost $65 per hour.

## Underground

**Cave diving** is a skilled sport requiring certification and the help of a certified guide. Some dare to go on their own, but this is not advisable. Snorkeling at the cenotes is generally safe but if trying a cenote not patronized by tourists be certain that, once you get in, you can get out. Should the water level be a long way from the rim, this could be a problem if no steps or ladders are in place.

### La Ruta de los Cenotes

The Yucatán has more than 5,000 cenotes, with about 1,400 that have been registered and studied. I'm not going to cover them all! In Maya, *dzonot* is the word that was bastardized by the Spanish into *cenote*. In Maya it means "abysmal and deep," probably because cenotes represented the

gates to the underworld. What they really are is underground rivers, caves, and sinkholes formed in porous limestone. The cenotes collect fresh water from the surrounding land and store it in their caverns. The water is pure, clear and usually about 78°F. Like all caves, cenotes have formed stalagmites and stalactites that make them visually attractive.

Cenotes vary. There are underground ones that we also call caves. There are those that are partially underground, those that are level with surrounding landscape so they are like a lake and there are the open wells. Many are accessible for diving and swimming.

The underground systems that offer cenote swimming, diving and spelunking run for 375-440 miles (600-700 km) from Puerto Morelos to the Sian Kaan Biosphere. From the main traffic light in Puerto Morelos, follow the road west. There is a sign indicating Ruta de los Cenotes and Central Vallarta (they are the same road). Once on that road you will see direction signs to each cenote and to private parks/resorts, some with excellent birding opportunities. Some caves/cenotes are just simple holes in the earth, while others, such as Tres Rios and El Rey Polo Resort, are developed sites for tourists to enjoy for longer periods.

Columns in caves are created when stalactites and stalagmites join together. A dripstone is an opening in the ceiling where minerals from dripping water form stalactites or stalagmites.

**Boca del Puma Selvatica**, 10 miles (16 km) from Puerto Morelos, has a bird watching tower, chicle village, zip line, and the cenote for rappelling, snorkeling and diving. The cenote is about 100 feet deep and has rock steps leading to the pool. Club Med tours patronize this watering hole. (See page 152 for Selvatica Zip Line).

**Verde Lucero** is just past Boca del Puma and about half a kilometer off the highway. It is 300 feet (94 m) across and there are wooden steps leading 20 feet (six m) down to the greenish-colored water. The cenote is 65 feet (20 m) deep, with excellent visibility, but nothing exciting for divers.

**Tres Bocas** is about 12 miles (20 km) from Puerto Morelos and is about 130 feet (40 m) across, with several stalactites surrounding the clear water. There are wooden steps leading to the water.

**Siete Bocas** is a dive cenote and a guide should be hired here. Otherwise, it is $5 to enter the grounds. There are six air holes, so once down a few feet the light shining through makes visibility good. Down about 95 feet (30 m), on the east side of the cenote, is a salt water and acid layer (caused from dissolution of calcium carbonate without the buffering of salt water). There is a bed of organic matter floating in the saltwater zone making it look like a floor (but it is not). Visibility from here down gets poor.

On the west side of this cenote is a guideline that goes only 40 feet (12 m) down. From there you can descend more than 150 feet (47 m) but the hydrogen sulfide will affect your skin, muscles and eyes. Be very careful.

## In the Sea

Snorkeling and diving are popular. See Cancún and Playa del Carmen for diving sites and descriptions. Be aware that currents are strong and no matter how well you swim a life jacket should always be worn.

*Puerto Morelos launches* (Jaontiveros)

At **Puerto Morelos National Marine Park**, you will need a life vest, entry ticket ($3) and a buoy with a flag. The park is part of the second-largest coral reef in the world with the reef being just a kilometer from shore. At the docks, many guides are available and willing to take you for a two-hour snorkel trip for about $25 per person. The wildlife is abundant and the coral worth the trip out.

Visitors are not permitted to hold or stand on reefs, collect shells, fish for corals, or carry gloves, spears, hooks, harpoons, knives or explosives. No waste or oil or grease are permitted to be dumped in the park and only biodegradable sun block is permitted (I would suggest not using any during this excursion). Motorized vehicles are also forbidden. Licensed guides and captains only are permitted to take visitors into the park and visitors must obey their guides' instructions.

### CORALS

There is coral everywhere in the ocean but the main hard corals you are likely to see are the brain, short and long star, finger, elkhorn, staghorn and plate corals.

#### Hard corals

Pillar corals form cylinders or spirals up to 10 feet (three m) in length.

Boulder, knob or mound corals are the bases for the reef structures. While growing, they resemble mountains, domes or knobs.

Brain corals look like huge brains and are usually cylindrical in shape with fissures like a brain.

Staghorn and elkhorn corals look like their namesakes. They can be seen on the reef crests, the parts of the reef that are occasionally exposed. The back of the reef is the landward side and the fore reef is the side facing the ocean. Staghorn coral usually grow behind the reef while the elkhorn, on the other side, are strong enough to take some of the wave action from the pounding ocean.

Leaf and plate coral looks likes leaves, or trees. Some are quite fleshy and the polyps become hidden in the flesh.

**Soft corals**

Soft corals include the hydro- and octocorals. One species of the hydrocoral is the fire coral. It has a poison in its cells that causes a burning on your skin when touched. These corals are tree shaped.

Octocorals look like plants and are hard to tell from seaweed. One of these is the feather that can grow up to six feet in length. Others are sea fans, delicate lace-like formations and sea whips, which look like whips.

## In Town

**El Faro Lighthouse** is the town's icon, although it's no longer functioning. It has been replaced by a newer, higher lighthouse. El Faro was blown part-way over by Hurricane Beulah in 1957 and has never been torn down

or pushed upright. It's probably the one most photographed building in the town.

## Tour Operators

**Dive Puerto Morelos**, ☎ 206-9084, www.divepuertomorelos.com, has one of the best reputations in Puerto Morelos for diving. However, due to health issues, they were taking time off when I last came around. They recommend **Almost Heaven Adventures**, Av Rojo Gomez, ☎ 871-0633, www.almostheavenadventures.com, for diving trips and **Diving Dog Tours**, located at the Co-op on the dock, ☎ 848-8819, www.puertomorelosfishing.com, for snorkeling or fishing.

These companies offer anywhere from 25 foot to 120 foot (eight- to 37-m) dives, night diving, wreck dives and cenote diving. A two-tank dive is $75, courses are $80 and up, and a two-tank cenote dive is $125. Wet suit rentals are $10/day. They take snorkelers ($25/four hours) and anglers for $250/four hours with up to four people.

**Maya Echo**, Av Rojo Gomez, ☎ 871-0136, is located in the Amor Inn and offers a splendid tour to the botanical garden, birding in Central Vallarta, and a swim in a cenote ($70 per person). They also promote purchasing crafts from local craft makers.

**Ojo de Agua**, Av Javier Rojo Gomex, #16, ☎ 871-0027, has a tour desk in hotel Ojo de Agua. They can take you for a day's fishing, beer and soft drinks included, maximum six people, for $300. Snorkel trips are $35 including gear, lunch, beer and soft drinks, with a bilingual guide. Be aware when snorkeling in this area that the currents are strong. No matter how good a swimmer you are, wear a life jacket. If you'd like a guided tour to the zip line and a couple of cenote dips with lunch and beer/soft drinks included, it will cost about $70 per person.

## Nightlife

Other than joining a local party on the beach where you will usually be more than welcome, nightlife tends to be a quiet wait for day life. However, **Gioconda**, one block from the Plaza on Rojo Gomez, has pizza and drinks. Gioconda is closed Sunday but opens every other day at 7 pm.

*La Gioconda*

*Shopping in Puerto Morelos*

## Shopping

**Alma Libre Bookstore**, on the Plaza, ☎ 871-0264, is open Tuesday to Saturday, 9-6, with two hours off in the afternoon. The store carries lots of English language books plus maps and post cards.

*Alma Libre Bookstore*

## Hotels

**Posada Amor**, Av Rojo Gomez, ☎ 871-0026, $, has cabañas with an eco-environment theme. Good deal, clean, friendly, family-run.

**Posada el Moro**, Av Rojo Gomez, 871-0159, $$, www.wetsetdivetravel.com/peminfo.asp, is a charming little place with just six rooms around a garden, half a block from the Plaza. There is air conditioning, Internet, fully equipped kitchens in the apartments and breakfast is included. They offer special dive package deals and discounts for longer stays (over a week).

| HOTEL PRICE CHART | |
|---|---|
| Cost per night for two before tax | |
| $ | Under $50 |
| $$ | $51-$100 |
| $$$ | $101-$175 |
| $$$$ | $176-$250 |
| $$$$$ | Over $250 |

**Ojo de Agua**, Av Javier Rojo Gomex, #16, ☎ 871-0027, www.ojo-de-aqua.com, $$, is on the beach but also with a pool and close to the town's restaurants. Good service and reasonable prices. They have studio rooms with kitchenettes for families. If reserving, you will need to make a deposit.

**Villas Latinas**, Javier Rojo Gomez #2-8, ☎ 871-0118, $$, has 24 rooms just a block from the Plaza. Check rooms before paying. Pool and parking are available. The owners are friendly and helpful.

**Rancho Sak Ol**, Rafael Melgar, ☎ 871-0463, www.ranchosakol.com, $$/$$$, is a beachside B&B with 16 rooms. They offer "hanging" beds that, I am told, are very comfortable. Self-serve breakfast is included and you can use the communal kitchen. Snorkel equipment and bicycles are available without charge, as is wireless Internet. Clean.

*Rancho Sak Ol*

**Hacienda Morelos**, Av Rafael Melgar, ☎ 871-0448, www.haciendamorelos.com, $$$, is on the beach, has a pool and restaurant, private parking and a dive shop that offers lessons and trips. Although comfortable, this is not your classic hacienda.

**Ceiba del Mar Spa & Resort**, Av Costero Norte, ☎ 872-8061, www.ceibadelmar.com, $$$$$, is an 88-room luxury resort on the beach at the edge of town, with two pools, and daily yoga and aqua-fit programs. There is also private butler service. The penthouse is $1,050 a night for two and the least expensive room during low season is $370.

*Secrets Excellence Riviera Cancún*

**Secrets Excellence Riviera Cancún**, main highway, Km 307, ☎ 206-9005, www.secrets-resorts.com, $$$$$/$$$$$$, has 440 rooms and is for adults only and

all-inclusive with most non-motorized water activities gratis. Deep sea fishing, snorkeling and diving are not. This is a very high-end resort. Food is generally good but not superb. The décor reminds me of British India.

## Restaurants

There is a Farmer's Market one block up from the Plaza on Wednesdays.

**El Cafi de la Plaza**, on the Plaza, ☎ 845-1597 is a popular café and health food store. It is operated by *Madre Tierra Magazine* (Mother Earth).

**Mama's Bakery**, Av Niños Heroes, ☎ 845-6810, is best as a place to get snacks for the beach or for breakfast and lunch. Closed Mondays.

**Bodo's**, Hacienda Morelos, on the beach, is open at noon till 9 pm daily except Wednesday. Their lunch special is about $5.50 and their specialties are fish and German foods.

**Hola Asia**, on the Plaza, is open at 1 pm for lunch and stays open for dinner until 9 pm. Closed Tuesdays. They serve Chinese, Thai and Japanese dishes.

**El Viejo Pescador**, south of the Plaza, ☎ 871-0296, serves Mexican seafood for about $8 per plate. They open at 5 pm for dinner.

# Punta Brava

*El Dorado Royale*

The only thing at Punta Brava is the luxury, adults-only, all-inclusive beachfront resort, **El Dorado Royale**, ☎ 850-3400, www.eldorado-resort.com, $$$$$. It is on Playa Tortuga, a long white stretch with strong currents but good snorkeling. Built on 450 acres of tropical jungle, this resort/time-share is reasonably priced, between $200 and $550 per person per night, but it seems that everything is extra. Check carefully before booking so you know what you are getting and what you will have to pay for.

# Playa del Secret

The name means secret beach. This is a small area with private vacation rentals that can sleep up to 10 and a long stretch of beach that sees leatherback and white turtles nesting and hatching between April and October. Bird watching in the jungle above the beach is excellent. For available condos or luxury homes, see www.playasecreto.com.

# Punta Maroma

**Punta Maroma Resort and Spa**, ☎ 872-8200, $$$$$. This little resort is for adults only, has a fitness center, pool and restaurants. They offer bar service on the beach and a weekly lobster BBQ in season. Restaurants and snack bars are open daily from 7 am to 11 pm and there is one fine-dining place. The grounds are a labyrinth of trails bordered by hedges and potted plants. The spa offers massages and aromatherapy. The cost is $450 per night with three-night minimum stay.

**Catalonia Playa Maroma**, ☎ 875-1020, www.cataloniaplayamaroma.com, $$$$$, is a family all-inclusive resort with six two-story buildings set in lush gardens. There is nightly entertainment and lots during the day too, such as diving, billiards, kayaking, tennis or gym workouts. Some of the rooms are in need of a touch-up. Otherwise, for the price, this is a good deal.

*Catalonia Playa Maroma*

# Tres Rios

The new **Tres Rios Hacienda**, five miles (nine km) north of Playa del Carmen and 36 miles (58 km) south of the Cancún Hotel Zone, ☎ 884-5444, www.haciendatresrios.com, $$$$$, should be open by the time

*Rendering of Tres Rios*

you read this. It will offer 275 luxury accommodations for those wanting to enjoy a family-owned and -operated, ecologically sensitive vacation. The hacienda will have two pools and three outdoor Jacuzzis. It will offer yoga, meditation, Tai Chi, sauna and steam room. Their long-term plan is to have a 1,700-room resort, convention center, equestrian center and yacht club. Romantic weddings, catered by the best, could be considered if you are soon to be married.

**Tres Rios Tropical Reserve** is open only to guests at the Hacienda. Located on the hacienda property, it is 370 acres of parkland featuring nature trails for walking, biking or horse riding through jungle, dune, mangrove and water habitats housing hundreds of species of birds and animals. The trail borders a river that joins two others and flows into the ocean. At the confluence where three rivers meet the sea is a swimming and snorkeling area. There are guides who will show you the way to a few of the 10 hidden cenotes where you are permitted to swim and snorkel. Paddling upstream in a kayak is popular.

The **Sensorama** senso-perceptual journey is a popular attraction here. You are blindfolded and introduced to different sensations equivalent to the Maya experience of traveling through wind, water, fire and earth. You can also get an authentic Maya massage with natural extracts and oils. Do not bring non-biodegradable sun lotions, radios, recorders, pets or cigarettes.

## Punta Bete

**Cocos Cabañas**, ☎ 884-9005, $$, has five small palapa-roof bungalows run by an ex-pat and her Mexican mate. There is a pool, garden, troop of entertaining waiters, and nightly entertainment around the pool. Continental breakfast is included and the restaurant is open from 11 am to 10 pm daily. They offer tours. A few hundred feet along the beach is the lunch restaurant Los Piños. It is a nice 3½-mile (six-km) walk to Playa del Carmen from Coco's. Besides this funky, fun place, there are three other high-end resorts at Punta Bete that seem to always be booked solid.

# Xcalacoco

Xcalacoco means twin coconuts. This settlement is three miles (four km) north of Playa del Carmen and runs about two miles (three km) farther north. There are some rustic accommodations and a couple of small seafood restaurants. Birding is top-notch along here. **Petite Lafitte**, 5.4 miles (nine km) north of Playa del Carmen, ☎ 873-0214, $$$$/$$$$$, www.petitlafitte.com, is a new addition to Captain Lafitte's old hotel. The new one is just a kilometer from the old one. Besides a huge hotel with numerous room designs, there is a two-story dining facility, an ocean-side pool, and a huge games room. The rooms start at $275 per night (high season) with a minimum of four nights stay and bookings must be done two weeks in advance. One of the draws to the old hotel was the friendly staff and good service. Many of the staff from the old hotel have moved to the new one. There is a restaurant on site but for nightlife you'd better bring a good book to read.

*Petite Lafitte*

In the beginning, all was invisible. The sky was motionless, the ocean quiet, the nights silent. Then came the word. (From the *Popol Vuh*, sacred Maya text.)

# Playa del Carmen

A bustling international city, Playa del Carmen is often preferred to big, busy Cancún as a destination. It is still easy to get around and not so big that you need a taxi to get from end to end. The bus station is in the center, one block up from the beach and the upscale "La Nueva Quinta" tourist area has now spread north. Playa is also the ferry center for those going to the quieter island of Cozumel.

# History

*Playa del Carmen (V. Lougheed)*

Named after Our Lady of Mount Carmel, the patron saint of Cancún who died in 1263, Playa was a popular port for Maya trading with cities as far south as Honduras. Playa was also a religious center that served to some capacity those living in Tulum and Cobá. In 1518, Juan de Grijlva stopped at Playa and Cozumel on the way to Cuba. Then came Cortéz, with destruction, disease and the Catholic religion. Many of the Maya temples were destroyed, people died and others hid in surrounding jungles. Playa went comatose until 1962 when Jacques Cousteau filmed the reefs. Cancún became a tourist destination, but Playa remained a small fishing village.

*Fifth Avenue in Playa del Carmen*

The first time I visited in the early 1980s, the town had a couple of basic hippie hotels, two eateries, a bus station and a nice beach. The dock offered boat service to Cozumel for vehicles but it wasn't very busy. Shortly after this, enthusiastic entrepreneurs started building, the town grew, the popular skinny-dipping crowd who worshipped the full moon, was replaced by the upscale resort seeker and Playa became international.

# Getting Here & Around

From the downtown Cancún Bus Station, buses head south every hour. It is two hours to Playa and, if going to Cozumel, another 45 minutes to cross the water. Coming from Chetumal, buses follow the main highway to Cancún every hour from 6 am to 6 pm daily.

In Playa the tourist infastructure has grown but not to the point where one can't walk from one end to the other within an hour. Walking on the beach is splendid; music from the beach bars will help keep your rhythm up.

# What to See & Do

## In the Air

**Skydive Playa**, Plaza Marina #32, ☎ 873-0192, www.skydive.com.mx. Here, members of the US Parachute Association will give you the thrill of your life – jump out of a Cessna and land on the sand after floating to earth. The cost is a mere $200-$300, depending on the type of jump. Jumpers must have a D license, their own rig (gear), AAD and a valid logbook. Although they say they will offer freefall jumps, reports indicate that the company is interested only in tandem. For the one-time jumper, tandem is the only option. The fall, while attached to a jumpmaster who has an extra large parachute, lasts 45-60 seconds, followed by a three- to four-minute canopy ride to the ground. And you can purchase videos to show your friends what a nut you really are.

Fly an ultralight plane over the Caribbean with **Yucatán Explorer**, ☎ 873-1626, www.Yucatánexplorer.com.mx, $99 for 25 minutes. With the introductory briefing, its over an hour from the time you arrive to when you land back at the airport. To see and photograph the coral reef and most of its surrounding life from 500 feet above the water is a thrill. Flight times are variable and transportation can be arranged for an additional fee.

## Underground

Although many experienced, certified divers go to the caves on their own, it is best to have a guide for the complicated caves/cenotes. If you are inexperienced, a guide is essential. Maps of the caves are for sale at the offices of some tour operators. The cost of a guided two-tank tour is around $100, depending on where you go and for how long.

**Hidden Worlds Cenotes Park**, 20 miles (32 km) south of Playa (north of Tulum), ☎ 877-8535, www.hiddenworlds.com, is open 9 am to 5 pm daily. They have guided tours for snorkeling at 9 and 11 am and 1, 2, and 3 pm. Diving tours are at 9 and 11 am and 1 pm. Some of the above-mentioned cenotes and caves are in this park. Once you pay your entry fee (snorkeling $25/diving $100/zip line $10), transportation to the caves on ATVs is included. Make reservations in case the tour is full. To get here, follow signs or take a taxi from Tulum (about $8 one way). If taking a bus going either north or south, ask the driver to let you off. There are plenty of signs. Besides snorkel and dive tours, you can cycle through the jungle harnessed to overhead cables (see below).

## Cave Diving/Snorkeling

**Aktun Chen**, 2½ miles (four km) south of Akumal going toward Xel-Há, ☎ 884-0444, www.aktunchen.com, is open 9 am-5 pm daily, with the last tour leaving at 4:30 pm (guided tours only). The cost is $24/adults, $13/children age three to 10. This is a park on grounds that were once a chicle plantation, with almost 1,000 acres of rainforest and a three-cave underground system formed about five million years ago. The name means a "cave with a cenote (or river) inside." At the end of the cave is a cenote that is used for swimming. The mineral formations that look like hanging tobacco plants are worth seeing and the gardens surrounding the cave are home to spider monkeys, numerous birds, wild boar and deer. A snake pit here holds all 15 species that inhabit the region. There is a snack bar for refreshments. Wear good walking shoes. The visit takes about an hour.

**Temple of Doom** is a mile (1.8 km) along the Cobá Road. The Coba Road is at the main intersection on the north side of town. Once at the intersection, turn right and drive for a mile. There is a sign but no attendant at the site so your car will be left unguarded. Theft is a major problem. Water levels are 10 feet below the lip and unless the ladder is secured (test it!) you may not be able to get out. Maximum depth is 60 feet (20 m). There are four rooms and a number of hallways or side-rooms.

**Sac Aktun**, 2½ miles (four km) on the Cobá Road, located at the main intersection on the north side of town. Once at the intersection, turn right. There is a $5 entry fee, and the cave is open 8 am to 5 pm daily. This is considered second only to Nohoch Nai Chich for

underground beauty. The biggest difference is that Sac Aktun is easier to reach. It has three exits so fresh air circulates, thus making the half-kilometer trail through the cave refreshing when walked. At the end of the tunnel is the Gran Cenote where cave divers spend hours following the tunnels beyond and swimmers spend minutes enjoying the cool fresh water. The temperature is usually 77°F and the water seldom reaches more than 40 feet (12 m) in depth. Divers follow the main line to the **Ho Tul Cenote** and cavern where they continue on to Paso Lagarto and all its offshoots.

**Vaca Há** is just a mile (two km) beyond Sac Aktun on the Cabà Road. Open from 9 am to 5 pm, entry fee is $5. The name means cow water. This cave is next to the parking area. The water at the top is brackish so swimming isn't appealing. Divers must descend a bit before they can see. The cave has few side-rooms. Located on the same property, at the end of the road, is the **Tortuga sinkhole**, a ground-level hole about 20 feet (seven m) wide. To descend, divers must hold on to the guidelines at all times because visibility is nonexistent at the entrance. There are two tunnels to follow, one going down to about 85 feet (25 m). A guide is recommended.

**Aktun Há**, five miles (eight km) along the Cobá Road, on the left, open 9 am to 5 pm, $5 entry fee, is a popular cave system but should be done only with a guide. This one is famous for its straw-like formations in the Room of Tears. Most divers take the upstream trip rather than the downstream one. Downstream is on your left when at the entrance. Going upstream you must navigate for quite a distance through some columns before you find the guideline. There are numerous rooms both up- and downstream. My favorite is Satan's Shithole (although some call it Satan's Silthole). Depth is 70 feet (22 m) or less.

**Dos Ojos** lies parallel to Nohoch Nai Chich and is promoted as a great first-dive cave that goes about 1,500 feet (500 m) in the light zone. Divers are never more than 30 feet (10 m) down nor 150 feet (50 m) from air. This cave was featured in an IMAX film in 2002 called *Journey into Amazing Caves*. Temperatures are about 77°F and visibility with natural light is good. Being popular for diving and snorkeling, the site sees about 100 visitors a day. This cave is connected to Bat Cave, another popular diving and snorkeling cenote.

**Nohoch Nai Chich** is open daily 9 am to 5 pm, entry $98, children under 12 $89. The cost is high because you need a burro to carry your gear into the site. It is located south of Dos Ojos and the parking is a 300 feet (100 m) west, off the highway. From there it's a long one-hour hike to the cenote. Once there you will find it sits 35 feet (10 m) below ground level. The word means "giant birdcage." The cave is Mexico's second-longest underwater cave system, running about 41½ miles (67 km). Most divers don't go more than a km in any direction. It is almost all underwater, with some cenotes accessible from ground level. Divers (with guides) will see large and very white caves and delicate formations throughout. This is considered, by Mexicans, the most beautifully decorated cave in the world, and they could be right.

# In Water

## Ocean Snorkeling

The reef, the longest in the western world, is just a short distance from shore. Coco Beach in Playa, Paamul, Xpu Ha and Akumal are also popular spots where the reef can be enjoyed without the use of a boat. However, be aware that the currents and waves can be strong.

Most dive shops in town rent snorkel gear. You can also join the tour operators for a trip farther out. This costs about $25-$50 for half a day. These operators also take divers to caves/cenotes where snorkelers can share the cost of the boat.

Black coral is not something you will see very often. White underwater, but black once it's dried, it takes about 100 years for a piece of black coral to grow one inch. The Sustainable Sea Project, partially funded by National Geographic, found that deep in the waters of the Caribbean black coral was "sparsely distributed, small and in marginal health." It is better not to purchase black coral jewelry, which helps create a market for this rare coral.

**Power Boat Adrenaline Rush**, Yucatán Adventures, one km south of Xcaret on the main highway, ☎ 873-1626, www.yucatánexplorer.com.mx, will take you at breakneck speed in a 500 HP boat through the Caribbean to Chacalal, a hidden inlet, to see a Maya temple, snorkel in a cave, and have lunch, with a complimentary drink included. Boats have freshwater showers a working hi-fi system, along with some life jackets. Tours leave at 9:45 am and last about 4½ hours. The cost is $140 per person and $68 for children seven-12.

# In Nature

**Sian Ka'an Biosphere**, www.siankaan.org or www.ceslak.org, is a 1.3-million acre Unesco Heritage Site established in 1986. Besides being a nesting ground for thousands of wetland birds and sea turtles it holds 23 archeological sites and Laguna Bacalar. Adjacent to Sian Ka'an is the Uaymil protected area. At present there are about 2,000 people living within the area, with the largest communities being Punta Allen and Punta Herrero. Sustainable development is their motto. The economy is mainly dependent on fishing supplemented by employment through tourism, turtle protection and plant nurseries.

Tourists visit the mangroves for birding, the Chinchorro reef for wildlife viewing and snorkeling, and the jungle for plant identification. The

*Aerial view of the Biosphere*

lagoon is great for birding and kayaking. Part of the appeal is that solar and wind energy are used for power, residual water is treated and composting toilets are used.

While here you can learn how to identify medicinal plants or visit unexcavated Maya ruins, some still with frescos and well-preserved sanctums. There are also cenotes. The reserve claims to have 345 species of birds, including the Jabiru stork, plus 1,200 varieties of plants, 230 types of trees with many endemic, and 318 species butterflies.

*Canal in the Sian Ka'an Biosphere*

If the above wildlife doesn't satisfy your curiosity, you can rent a kayak ($50 for half a day with guide, $30 without a guide) and visit the lagoons and mangroves to search for more birds and butterflies. Guides are recommended, as getting lost in this mosquito-infested jungle would be unpleasant. If you go between April and September, you may have luck watching turtles lay and/or hatch their eggs.

There are five entrances to the park, all manned by government employees. Next to Calakmul, this is the best preserve in the Yucatán.

**Amigos de Sian Ka'an**, www.amigosdesiankaan.org, is a group of scientists and conservationists whose main mandate is to conserve and educate. They provide environmental training and look for environmental sustainability. At present they have 20 programs, which they administer.

Sian Ka'an
Biosphere Reserve
to Cancún
to Cobá
Gran Cenote
Tulum
Entrance
Station
Muyil
Unpaved Road
Paved Road
Lodging
Food
N
HUNTER PUBLISHING
TROPICAL FOREST
Demonstrative
Farm
Punta
Allen
to Mérida
Research
Center
Caribbean Sea
Ascension
Bay
to Felipe
Carillo Puerto
SAVANNA/MANGROVE
TROPICAL
FOREST
Espiritu
Santo Bay
Punta
Herrero
TROPICAL
FOREST
TROPICAL
FOREST
Entrance
Station
Limones
25 KM
25 MILES
to Chetumal
NOT TO SCALE
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They lobby ecological and environmental organizations that can help and they try to follow all the latest theories in environmental conservation. Donations can be made through their website.

Accommodations are tents on wooden platforms set upon sand dunes, for $75-$120 (depending on size) a day. There are shared showers that spray lagoon water. Although the reserve is worth visiting and highly recommended, staying here should be carefully considered. There are some small hotels at Majahual and two at Laguna Bacalar (see pages 274-75 for details) that may be a bit more comfortable than tenting.

**Xaman Há Aviary**, Paseo Xaman-Há, ☎ 873-0318, open 9 am to 5 pm daily, has a $15 entry fee (way overpriced). This fly-through bird park has hundreds of exotic birds, indigenous to the Yucatán nesting in the botanical gardens and surrounding jungle. It is a natural (almost) environment with some food put out to attract birds. But the best time to see a large variety of birds is January and February when they are migrating. Photography is easy as the subjects aren't shy.

## On the Links

*Playacar Golf Club*

**Playacar Golf Club**, Paseo Xaman-Há, Playacar (hotel zone), is an 18-hole, par-72, 7,144-yard, Robert Von Hagge-designed course. Costs are $190 for 18 holes, $130 after 2 pm and $90 for those under 16. Clubs and carts equipped with GPS are available. Any balls lost in the jungle can be played from within two club lengths of where the ball entered, with a one-stroke penalty. There is a pro shop, clubhouse, locker rooms, showers and special rates with some hotels. This is considered one of the more challenging courses on the Maya Riviera.

**Playa Paraiso Golf Club**, 22.8 miles (36.7 km) north of Puerto Aventuras, ☎ 923-2722, is a B. P. Dye-designed, 18-hole, par-72, 6,641-yard course that incorporates cenotes and sand traps. There are undulating greens, narrow fairways and deep bunkers that offer a challenge to the best of players. If staying at the Iberostar Hotel, some all-inclusive packages include a golf ticket and drinks. The cost if not staying at the hotel is $190 per per-

son every day except Saturday when it is not open to the public or $125 for twilight games (after 2 pm). Children under 16 pay $85.

## For the Brain

**Language School**, 386 Ontario St., Toronto, Ont. Canada, M5A 2V7. ☎ 800-219-9924, www.languagesabroad.com, offers home-stay language classes. There are two options; live with a family that will supply a semi-private or private room with breakfast included or live in a semi-private apartment making your own meals. Minimum stay is one week and you must book two weeks in advance, confirming it with a $300 deposit. Should you wish to have just a standard course, which includes four one-hour lessons a day for five days, the cost is $170 per week (you find your own accommodations). Intensive study offers six one-hour lessons a day for five days and costs $270 per week (without accommodations). The school will test you to see what level you are at and place you appropriately. You must be at least 17 years of age to attend. If accommodations and lessons are included, prices start at $440 per week and decrease the longer you stay. Home stay programs include some extracurricular activities.

## On Wheels

**ATV, Yucatán Explorer**, one km south of Xcaret on the main highway, ☎ 873-1626, www.yucatánexplorer.com.mx. Driving an ATV for two hours through the jungle, stopping to feed monkeys and swim in a cenote could be fun, although it is not very environmentally sensitive. After the swim you will race along the trail to a ruin and dry cave full of bats. Tours leave at 9 and 11 am, and 1 and 3 pm daily. The cost is $60 for a one-person vehicle and $50 per person for a double. Helmets and safety goggles are available. In the event of injury, being without a helmet or goggles, could invalidate your medical insurance.

**Sky Cycling**, Hidden Worlds, 20 miles (32 km) south of Playa, ☎ 877-8535, www.hiddenworlds.com, open 9 am to 3 pm. Tours leave every hour. This sport is the newest thing. A contraption with a seat and peddles is attached to a cable a km long and you peddle your way over the jungle canopy. The incline of the cable is not so steep that you have to work hard to move. There are both hand and foot brakes and the possibility of the bike falling off the cable is not likely. Part-way through the trip, you can stop at a cold-water cenote for a refreshing dip. The last half is through a cave and over two more cenotes.

The trip is about 2½ hours and costs $75 per adult or $50 for children. Transportation from Playa is included. These caves/cenotes are worth visiting. Children must be 48 inches or higher to participate.

## Nightlife

Playa del Carmen, like Cancún, ***is*** nightlife, but things are much tamer here. The old Spanish custom is to walk along the Prada with the hope of seeing friends that you can chat with. Fifth Avenue in Playa is the Prada where everyone wanders around, window shops, stops for a drink and hopes to see friends – already made or to be made. Once you hit the bars, of which there are hundreds, follow the crowd that appeals to you. The ubiquitous Señor Frog's is here, advertising extreme entertainment.

**Deseo Lounge**, 5th Ave and 12th St, ☎ 879-3620, is an adults-only rooftop bar where you order very expensive drinks to consume on one of the beds draped in curtains and discretely arranged around a small pool and Jacuzzi. Occasionally there are old movies shown without sound on one of the walls. This is also a hotel.

**Blue Parrot**, 12th St North and 1st Av, ☎ 803-5687, www.blueparrot.com, open 11 am-4 am daily, is the most popular place to go after 11 pm. The floor is sand, bar seats are swings and the dance area is off to the side and closer to the beach. Fire dancing is the most popular show, although there is dance music, mostly pop, all night long. The setting is very romantic.

**Tequila Barrel**, 5th Ave between 6th and 8th St, ☎ 873-0195, open 9 am-2 am, is a people watcher's bar that specializes in tequila cocktails. Service is slow but prices are good (under $5).

**The Bali,** Calle 12 North and 5th Av, ☎ 803-2864, open 10 pm-4 am, www.baliclub.com.mx, can hold up to 1,200 people who want to rave all night in an Indonesian, rather than Mexican, atmosphere.

All-night rave parties became trendy in the late 1980s, attracting up to 30,000 people for the all-night dance-athons. The most popular step in the free-form rave dancing is the wheelchair. To do this, walk onto the floor, let your hands hang loosely at hip level while holding your glowstick, lift one leg, bend it at the knee and then pretend to wheel yourself around in your imaginary chair.

**El Pica Pica**, 5th Av between 6th & 8th (second floor), open 10:30 am-2 am (no phone). This is a tapas bar that during happy hour offers coronas for a

buck a bottle (minimum two bottles). Salsa music is played on Wednesdays starting at 8 pm.

## Shopping

*Fifth Avenue*

Fifth Avenue is full of souvenir shops with everything from shell products to carved mahogany. Mexico is known for vanilla, spices and salsas. Purchase them at the **Mega**, Av Juárez (Calle 1 south) or any other large Mexican grocery store. The prices are cheaper and the quality just as good. If buying vanilla, be certain it says "pura" in the description.

When shopping, be sure to barter. A vendor will never sell anything at a loss. Be aware that items in Playa are usually 25% less than in Cancún. For example, a hammock in Playa should be $25-$40, a hand-crocheted tablecloth, $10-$15, a t-shirt $10-$25, depending on how many you purchase and the quality.

## Hotels

**La Rana Cansada**, Calle 10 #132, ☎ 873-0389, www.ranacansada.com, $, has 15 rooms just 300 feet from the beach. There is a community kitchen and common area. Sparse but comfortable, clean and friendly.

**Hotel Posada Cow Boy's**, Juárez Av #10 and Calle 2 north, ☎ 879-3838, $, is the most basic accommodation in town.

**El Palomar Hostel**, Av Juárez & Calle 2 north, ☎ 873-0144, www.elpalomarhostel.com, $, is across from the bus station. There are dorms and private rooms, lockers, full kitchen, and book exchange. The second story is for dorms, the third for private rooms and the roof is the communal area.

**Urban Hostel**, 10th Av between 4th & 6th, ☎ 803-3378, $, is two blocks from the beach and bus station. It has both dorms and private rooms, lockers, a terrace, kitchen and laundry service.

| HOTEL PRICE CHART | |
|---|---|
| Cost per night for two before tax | |
| $ | Under $75 |
| $$ | $75-$150 |
| $$$ | $151-$225 |
| $$$$ | $226-$300 |
| $$$$$ | Over $300 |

**Hotel Labnah**, Calle 6 and 5th Av, ☎ 873-2099, www.labnah.com, $$, is a lovely little place with just 15 rooms and a pool. Breakfast is included. I'd recommend booking ahead.

**San Juan Pension**, Av 5, #165 between 6 and 8th St north, ☎ 873-0647, www.pensionajuan.com, $$, is a great little place that sparkles with cleanliness and hums with friendliness. Located just two blocks from the 5th Av action and close to the bus station. The spacious front rooms over the street aren't noisy on most nights. Good deal.

**Posada Marinelly**, Av Juárez #147 and 10th Av, ☎ 873-0140, $$, is fairly basic but clean. It is also in a good location.

**Hotel All Riviera**, Calle 2 North and 5th Ave, ☎ 879-3444, www.hotelallriviera.com, $$/$$$, is right on the beach. All rooms have balconies and face the ocean. This is a good choice for this price range and location.

**Blue Parrot Inn**, Calle 12 and 1st Ave, ☎ 873-3444, $$$, www.blueparrot.com, is one of the oldest hotels in town and is still offering the same quality it did in 1984. The only big problem is that the rooms facing the street can be a bit noisy at night. The rooms are very good for this price range and the bar downstairs is popular.

**Mosquito Blue**, 5th Av between 12th and 14th St, ☎ 873-1335, $$$, www.mosquitoblue.com, has 20 tastefully decorated rooms, and two pools. The hotel is a block from the 5th Av action and two blocks from the beach.

*Mosquito Blue*

**El Deseo**, Av 5 & Calle 12, ☎ 879-3620, $$$/$$$$, has the "bed bar" outside and 15 available rooms for adults only. They advertise "objects of desire" along with air conditioning and Internet.

**Hacienda Vista Real**, Playacar, ☎ 803-1585, www.hvr.com.mx, $$$$, has 78 rooms and a huge fleet of bikes for guests to explore Playa. They do this because they are a little distance from the beach and from town, but it is a great idea for environmentally safe fun. Views and décor with marble, wood, and granite are their specialty. This is a luxury spa for families.

**La Tortuga Hotel and Spa**, 10th Av between 12th and 14th, ☎ 873-1484, www.hotellatortuga.com, $$$$/$$$$$, is an intimate place with just 51 rooms and is a block from 5th Av. The grounds are mostly lush jungle,

*La Tortuga*

interspersed with benches, lounge chairs and a pool. The service is exceptional, equal to any five-star anywhere in the world. Highly recommended.

**Reef Club**, Xaman Há Retorno, Playacar, ☎ 873-4120, $$$$$, is an all-inclusive family hotel with 362 rooms, two pools and a swim-up bar. Food, service and ambiance are all OK, but not five-star. Beware of the timeshare "tour." The center of town is a 30-minute, two-mile (three-km) walk.

**Riu Palace**, Av Xaman Há #18, Playacar, ☎ 877-4200, $$$$$, www.riu.com, has 434 rooms equipped with Riu's renowned mini-bar and liquor dispenser. This is a huge all-inclusive complex with adjoining Riu Yucatán, Riu Playacar and Club Hotel Riu Tequila. The place is beautiful, with hand-painted murals, crystal water fountains, gazebos and iron benches throughout the tropical gardens. There are also sun shelters by the pool. There is wind surfing, water polo, tennis, and snorkeling available. But the rooms need some face-lifting to justify the cost.

## Restaurants

In addition to your usual Burger King (Calle 1 & 5th), Domino's Pizza (Av Juárez between 40th & 45th), Pizza House (30 Av & 24th) and Senior Frog's (at the Commercial Center), Playa throbs with restaurants. I don't think I've listed 10% of the options below. Be brave and try a wide variety of them (and send me a note on both the good and the bad!)

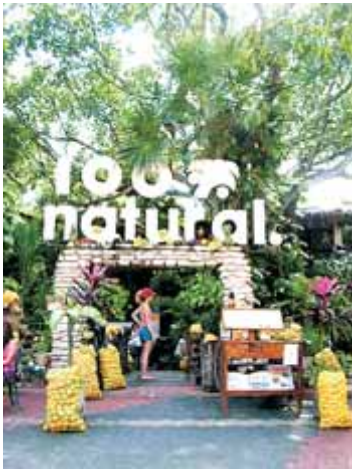
**Ah Cacao Chocolate Café**, 5th Av and Constituyentes, ☎ 803-5748, open 7:15 am to 11:45 pm daily, www.ahcacao.com. It has a wide variety of chocolate goodies from drinks to sweets. Not only is this a good spot for an afternoon break but it's a great place to find gifts such as cacao beans, or vanilla (if not buying some from the local grocery store) for those back home.

Chocolate was named after the Maya ruler of Tikal who built the main temple and restored the city to glory.

**Java Joe's,** Calle 10, between 5th & 10th, ☎ 876-2694, www.javajoes.net, open 6:30 am to 11 pm daily. Have breakfast while waiting for your take-out lunch to eat on the beach or at some remote ruins.

**La Quinta Pasion**, Av 26 between 5th & 10th, ☎ 803-2421, is open from 8 to 11 am for a great breakfast buffet costing about $6 per person.

**Ciao Gelato**, the best Italian ice cream café, has two locations: 5th Av between 2nd & 4th and 5th Av between 26th & 28th. You could buy at one location, eat while walking to the second and continue back and forth all day. You might get through all the flavors before you leave town.




*100% Natural*

**100% Natural**, 5th Av between 10 & 12, ☎ 873-2242, www.100natural.com.mx, has freshly made pastas, soy burgers, huge sandwiches, smoothies and more. Everything is done up Mexican style.

*Limones*

**Limones**, 5th Av and 6th, ☎ 873-0848, www.limones-restaurant.com.mx, is an upscale seafood place, popular with the international crowd. It is off the street, down a path through groomed vegetation. Steak with trimmings is about $30 per person.

**El Asador de Manolo**, 10th Av between 26th & 28th, ☎ 803-0632, www.el-asador.com, is for those seeking some of the best steak in the world for less than $20, finished off with a dish of flan ($3) or a crêpe ($3.50-$4). Recommended.

**Sol Food Restaurant**, 5th Av between 20 & 22nd, ☎ 803-2603, offers free cocktails with every dinner ordered. They have a super open-faced grilled mushroom sandwich with sun-dried tomato pesto and roasted garlic for $10. Really good. Nice atmosphere.

**Aca Los Tacos**, 5th Av & Constituyentes, ☎ 803-4482, for the obligatory taco lunch/dinner at less than $10 per person.

**Casa del Agua**, 5th Av between Calle 4 & 2, 2nd floor, ☎ 873-1216, www.lacasadelagua.com.mx, open 7 am to midnight daily. Their wine list covers 140 choices from 12 countries. Their specialty is sea food and the food is really worth stopping for, whether its breakfast, lunch or dinner. If you can't decide what to eat, ask the waiter to recommend something. It will be the best fish dish of that day for about $12. However, the pasta isn't anything to skip over either. Recommended.

*Café Tropical*

**Café Tropical,** 5th Av between 8 and 10, ☎ 873-2111, open 7 am to midnight, is by far the best restaurant I have found in my research. I had lemon chicken the first time and traditional chicken in green sauce the second. The bill was under $20 for two and the service was excellent. It is also nice to sit on the balcony here and watch the traffic on the streets. If Casa del Agua is recommended, Tropical is highly recommended.

# Cozumel

Cozumel, known as the island of swallows, is just 30 miles (48 km) long and 16 miles (25 km) wide. It buzzes with tourists when the cruise ships arrive. Once they leave, the island returns to a Mexican lifestyle. When the cruise crowd is around, you should be well away, exploring the farthest ends of the island. The locals love visitors who stay and seek out the hidden treasures.

## Getting Here & Around

You will arrive at the dock in front of San Miguel's main Plaza and will have to work your way through the crowd of tour operators to the Malacón. Circling the Plaza in a radius of about one or two blocks are souvenir shops, restaurants and rental companies. Beyond that are local homes, hotels, and businesses. There are good grocery stores and shoe shops (Mexico long ago built a reputation for selling good-quality leather shoes).

Avenues run north and south, with the square being the dividing line. The cross streets (*calles*) go east and west. Those north of the Plaza are even-numbered and those south are odd.

## History

About 2,000 years ago the Maya settled on the island's south end and built sacred temples dedicated to Ixchel, goddess of moon, water and fertility. The site is now called San Gervasio. In the old days Maya living on the island and around Playa del Carmen were obligated to make a pilgrimage at least once in their lifetime to worship IxChel.

*The Manita Structure at San Gervasio on IxChel, 1000-1200 AD (TonyKnaff)*

Ixchel was so beautiful that all the gods except Kinich Ahau, the Sun God, were in love with her. But Ixchel loved Kinich Ahau obsessively and constantly followed him across the sky. The more she longed for him, the worse the weather became. There were floods and high tides and crops died. To gain Kinich Ahau's attention, Ixchel wove a beautiful cloth. This tactic worked and they soon married. After she bore him numerous Jaguar children, her grandfather struck her dead with lightning (he didn't like the marriage). She lay for 183 days before returning to the palace. But by now Kinich Ahau had become jealous and suspicious, accusing her often of an incestuous affair with her brother. She went into hiding on the island of Cozumel and, to keep busy, she helped women with childbirth.

In 1518, Juan de Grijalba arrived and gave the first catholic mass at Las Casitas beach north of the Plaza. A year later Cortéz waited for the arrival of Geronimo de Aguilar and Gonzalo Guerrero so he could use them as intermediaries between him and the Maya. When they arrived, there were about 40,000 Maya but within 50 years the population had dropped due to disease, mostly smallpox, to 30. By 1600 there wasn't a soul left. During the Caste War the island was used as a sanctuary by the Maya.

After the war, Cozumel became a deep-sea port and exported everything from coconuts to chicle, sending these products from one end of Mexico to the other. Charles Lindbergh in 1929 started using Cozumel as a stopover spot on his trips between Florida and Panama. After the Second World War, road transportation made shipping uneconomical. The population again took a dip and by 1970 was at 10,000. However during that period, Jacques Cousteau let the world know about the exceptional diving opportunities and the tourists flocked in like migrating birds. Today the population is about 75,000, much of it tied to the tourist trade.

## Getting Here & Around

Ferries leave for Cozumel from Playa del Carmen on the mainland every hour from 6 am to 11 pm, except at 7 am and 10 pm. They take an hour to get to the island. Ferries leave

*Ferry to Cozumel from Playa del Carmen* (Galen Frysinger)

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Cozumel for Playa every hour from 5 am to 10 pm, except at 6 am and 9 pm.

There are three companies servicing the island for walk-on passengers – **Water Jet's Mexico**, ☎ 872-1578, **UltraMar**, ☎ 869-3223, and **Sofisticado**, ☎ 879-3112. **Trans del Caribe**, ☎ 872-7688, is the ferry service for cars. The first three travel between Playa del Carmen and San Miguel on the island. Trans del Caribe leaves from Puerto Morelos on the mainland and sails to Punta Venado on the island.

The passenger service is on fast boats with air conditioning and sun decks. The cost is $8 per person for the 50-minute trip and tickets are purchased at the dock in either port. During peak seasons you should arrive at least an hour before sailing time.

Car ferries leave from Punta Venado (the old dock was at Puerto Morelsos but that has closed), about seven km south of Playa, Monday to Saturday at 4:30 am, 9 am, 1, 3, 7 pm and midnight; Sunday at 4:30, 9 am and 3, and 7 pm. The car ferries leave Cozumel Monday to Saturday at 2, 7, 11 am, and 3, 5, 9 pm; Sunday at 7 am, 1, 5, and 9 pm. The cost is $80 per vehicle including driver and $3 extra for each passenger. You should be at the dock at least an hour before your scheduled departure time.

Once on the island you can walk to anywhere in town or rent a car, scooter or bicycle to explore the island. Taxis are abundant and can be called at ☎ 872-0236. The cost should be $10 to the tip of the island but often tourists pay up to $20.

## Festivals

**Cozumel Carnival** or **Mardi Gras** is celebrated every February/March for the week before Lent. Cozumel has one of the more exuberant celebrations in Mexico, with parades, games, competitions and concerts that go all night long. If you have a hotel near the Plaza or park, you might plan on sleeping during the day and enjoying the celebrations at night because you won't be able to sleep

*At Cozumel's Carnival*

# Downtown San Miguel

NOT TO SCALE

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at night even if you want to. The parade costumes are spectacular, reminiscent of Montezuma's famous bird-feather cape.

**El Cedral**, the festival of the Holy Cross, is celebrated in April/May at the village of Cedral, about 10 miles (16 km) south of San Miguel and a bit east. There is a sign. During the Caste War, Father Casimiro Cardenas took shelter in a church on the mainland when the Spanish attacked. Many died and Cardenas was seriously wounded but he held a cross in his hand and prayed. He survived and took shelter on Cozumel, then built a village over the old ruins of Oycib. He vowed to have a special celebration every year on the anniversary of the attack and of his survival. He kept his vow and his wife, after his death, carried on the tradition. Today, the celebration is still respected.

## What to See & Do

The **monument** in San Miguel's Plaza is to **Gonzalo Guerrero**, a shipwrecked Spaniard who lived among the Maya, married a Maya princess and learned the language. He is remembered as the "Father of the Long and Painful Process of Crossbreeding." Now there's humor!

**Museum of the Island**, Av Rafael Melgar, between Calle 4 & 6, ☎ 872-1434, www.cozumelparks.org.mx, is open 9 am to 6 pm daily, with a fee of $3 to enter. The building was once a luxurious hotel that fell into disarray. It was rescued by the town and made into a museum. Occupying two stories, the museum features both natural and historical information about the island. The natural sections include evolutionary information on reefs as well as wildlife migration and management. The historical section includes displays from pirates, Maya and the Spanish. Most interesting are the historical photographs showing the transformation of the island from 100 years ago to the present. There is a restaurant on site, ☎ 872-0838, open 7 am to 2 pm daily.

*Cozumel from space*

## Beaches

The currents off Cozumel are strong and, if you are going in more than waist deep from shore, you should have a life jacket, no matter how strong a swimmer you are.

**Palancar Beach** is the southernmost beach on the island and is sparsely populated. The people you will see there are not partiers. This beach, like most along this shore, is beautiful. There are palapas, a restaurant and bar and a dive operator. Beach chairs and snorkel or fishing supplies are for rent.

**Nachi-Cocom Beach Club/Water Sports**, www.cozumelnachicocom.net, is at the south end of the west beach and patronized mostly by the cruise crowd. There is no charge to enter the site but they offer an all-inclusive ticket that is just $16 for cruise passengers and $32 for independent travelers. There is a minimum of $12 that you must spend at the site on drinks, gear and tips (over the entry fee). The all-inclusive ticket gives you use of the pool, hot tub and beach. You also get watered-down drinks and lounge chairs. Gear and food is extra. Food will cost about $12 for a lunch serving of fish or $8 for a sandwich. A cocktail is about $8. I'd call this slightly overpriced! The site is wheelchair-accessible.

**Paradise Beach** is 10 miles (17 km) south of the Plaza and 8 km (5 miles) south of the cruise ship pier and was once part of San Francisco Beach. Touted as the best beach on the island, it has lounge chairs and umbrellas free of charge on a first come first get basis. Waiters will serve drinks and food from the restaurant. There are change rooms, washroom facilities, showers, shops and tour operators offering jet skis, dives and snorkel trips. Beach toys, water trampolines, kayaks and sun mats can also be rented. There is an all-inclusive $10 ticket for the use of beach toys.

*Paradise Beach*

**Playa San Francisco** is a three-miles (five-km) beach just north of Paradise. It serves as the party beach for this area. There are shopping stalls, a restaurant and bar, and a swim/beach toy area that is roped off. The service, however, is falling off at this beach. If this is too tame for you, it's about a half-km to Playa Mia, where the real partying occurs.

**Mr Sanchos Beach Club/Restaurant** is for the cruise crowd. There is no charge to enter this complex, which can hold up to 500 people. There is a restaurant, bar, Jacuzzi, shopping mall and some beach gear that can be rented. Palapas, tables, chairs and umbrellas are free. Of course, if at a table, you are expected to eat and drink. From here you can take a glass bottom boat trip or a banana boat ride, and go para sailing, wind surfing, kayaking, horseback riding and snorkeling. There's also the ATV jungle ride. A 15-minute massage is $20 and a deep tissue massage is $25. The beach just north of Mr Sanchos is a private one for the cruise crowd, and is also owned by Mr Sanchos.

**Playa Mia (Playa del Sol)** is the booze cruise stopping point. The entry fee is $10 if traveling independently. Although there is a small zoo, some water sports such as kayaks and pedal boats, this is really a party beach.

**COSTS**

Costs for using equipment at the above beaches may vary by a few dollars but generally the following applies.

| | |
|---|---|
| Wave runners | $55 for 30 minutes |
| Banana boats | $10 for 20 minutes |
| Parasail | $45 for 10 minutes |
| Climbing wall | $10 for adults/$7 for children |
| Glass bottom boat | $55 for three hours |
| Snorkel | $35-$65 |

Be aware that some sail and snorkel trips will cost up to $300. If you snorkel offshore, the cost to rent flippers and a mask is about $15 an hour.

| | |
|---|---|
| Diving | One tank $50, two tanks $75 |
| Jeep/dune buggy tours | $95 for five-seven hours |
| Deep-sea fishing | About $525 for four hours |
| Submarine float | $60-$90 for two hours |

**Chankanaab Park** is just 6½ miles (12 km) south of the Plaza and three miles (five km) south of the Cruise Ship Pier, ☎ 872-094, open 8 am to 6 pm daily, www.cozumelpaks.com.mx. There is also a dive site by this name, located across the road. Established in 1980, Chankanaab Park is Mexico's oldest marine park and a "must see" while on Cozumel. It has a salt-water lagoon, a botanical garden and Los Uvas sandy beach. Due to ecological sensitivity, the lagoon is no longer a swimming hole but diving and snorkeling are good off the beach. The reef sits about 200 yards from shore and the waters have underwater statues of Chaak Mool, and the Virgin Mary. The botanical gardens include mangroves, flowering plants and trees housing numerous birds and reptiles. It also has some modern

Maya temples. **Swim with Dolphins** will give you some educational time (to learn about dolphins) and about 15 minutes to kiss the dolphin and rub his belly – all for $100. Your actual time with the dolphin won't be more than 60 seconds. Photos cost another $15-$20. If you want a "Royal" swim for an extra $25, you will get 30 minutes of swim time. There are chairs, palapas and full restaurant services at the park, along with washrooms and change rooms.

## Dive/Snorkel Sites

There are many sites and often the names are changed to attract divers. Talk to other divers and go only with a reputable dive master. If you are snorkeling off a dive boat, never go into these waters without a life jacket, no matter how good a swimmer you are. The currents are strong and really scary, especially near the north end, avoided by even experienced, strong swimmers. There is a recompression chamber on the island, available 24 hours a day, ☎ 872-2387 or 872-1430, www.sssnetwork.com.

*Barracuda at Paradise Reef (MathKnight)*

**Barracuda Reef** goes down 70 feet (20 m) and has strong currents running up to three knots. This site is seldom visited and only by experienced divers.

**San Juan Reef** is 110 feet (35 m) deep and is for the experienced diver only. An ascent line is necessary and rough conditions are common. The current runs about three knots at all times and down currents are also common.

**Paradise Reef** is a shallow dive for the beginner. It drops to 50 feet (15 m) and is about 600 feet (200 m) from shore. The current is moderate. The reef is 60-90 feet (20-30 m) wide and one mile (1½ km) long with coral heads about 10 feet (three m). Small caves and tunnels form the reef.

**Tormentos Reef** is a shallow dive for intermediate skill levels. It goes down to where green moray eels, the reef's most famous guest, and angelfish, groupers, grunts and snappers can be seen. There are strong and fast currents here. The depth is 35-60 feet (10-20 m) on average.

**Yucab** is an excellent novice dive that goes down to 60 feet (20 m). Its colorful wildlife and more than 500 coral formations will addict the newest divers. The brain corals are huge. Although the current is strong, it seems attractive to barracudas. This is also a good snorkel area.

**Columbia Reef** is for intermediate divers and goes around 80-90 feet (25-30 m) down. There are huge coral pinnacles, dotted with caves and tunnels. The wildlife is just as spectacular. This dive is highly recommended for those of this skill level.

**Palancar Horseshoe** is an intermediate dive that goes from 20 to 125 feet (seven to 40 m). There are huge brain corals here. This is the most famous dive from Cozumel.

**Punta Tunich** is an intermediate-to-advanced dive site. A long coral ridge rises from about 70 feet (23 m) where green morays and groupers play. Strong currents make this a difficult spot.

**Cedral Wall** is intermediate level because of the strong currents, although it does go down to 90 feet (30 m). It is rich in marine life.

**Paso el Cedral** is an intermediate dive that drops 60 feet (20 m) to reefs with caverns hiding large fish and the green morays, always a treat to see.

**Colombia Shallow** is for the novice. It drops to about 35 feet (10 m) into a sea garden that seems to go all the way to Cancún. It's an excellent choice for beginners.

**Devil's Throat** is for experienced divers and goes down 140 feet (45 m). This dive is a favorite with locals. As the name suggests, a long tunnel (the throat) takes you to a cavern and more passages. Be certain to go only with a very skilled dive master on this one. There are also cliffs and walls at the 100-foot (30-m) level.

**Little Caves** is a good dive for intermediates that goes down about 70 feet (20 m) to canyons, ravines and narrow tunnels.

**Santa Maria Reef** is at the end of San Francisco Beach and although it goes down about 60 feet (18 m) along a wall with tube sponges and coral, it doesn't offer much for wildlife.

**Maracaibo or Lighthouse Reef** is for expert divers only. It's a wall dive that gets better the farther down you go – to about 160 feet (50 m)! Because of its exposed location, the current and surf are both a huge danger.

## On the Links

**Cozumel Golf and Country Club**, Km 6.5 north, ☎ 872-9570, www.countryclub.com.mx, is a Nicklaus-designed, par-72, 6,800-yard course. Fourteen holes have water. The club has a putting/chipping green, club rentals, overnight bag storage, drink carts, and a pro shop. The cost, including a shared cart, is $169 for starts before 1:30 pm and $105 for those later. One club rule prohibits retrieving balls from water hazards as there are occasionally crocs in them.

## On Wheels

There are two lighthouses on the island, one at each end. **Punta Sur Lighthouse**, ☎ 872-0972, is open 8 am to 5 pm daily, $10 entry fee, www.cozumelparks.com.mex. The lighthouse is at the southern tip of the island on a road that branches off from the main one. Follow signs. This

*Looking north from the top of the Punta Sur lighthouse (Ken Thomas)*

lighthouse was built in 1934, replacing the original which was built in the 1800s. There are about 130 steps leading to the tower and observation walkway at the top, where the views are spectacular. The cost includes entrance to the marine museum, located in what was once the lighthouse keeper's home. The wildlife is good and with luck you'll not only see flamingos but sea turtles too. Taking a taxi out here would be expensive ($30). Rent a car or bike.

**Punta Molas Faro**, the second lighthouse, is at the northeastern end of the island and a few difficult miles off the main road. Only a four-wheel drive, during dry season, can manage the trip. Once you leave the main road, the track leading to the lighthouse is really a challenge. Getting stuck is a popular sport. From the abandoned lighthouse you can see rotting ships sunk by pirates in the 1700s. The lighthouse, with a few ruins near its base, is especially interesting to birders.

**Ruins of San Gervasio**. Follow Boulevard Juárez east for 10½ miles (17 km) to San Gervasio access road and follow it to the end. ☎ 872-0093, open 8 am to 5 pm daily. The entry fee is $5 per person and you need about an hour to see it properly. This was once a pilgrimage site for Maya. The temples were dedicated to Ixchel, Lady Rainbow, the goddess of the moon,

water and fertility. She is the topnotch goddess and ruler of life and death. The Temple of Hands has a number of children's handprints on the walls. Beware ladies – if you stand under the arch at the entrance to the ruins, you will become pregnant! Wear good walking shoes (so you can make a wide detour around the arch) and bring water. A guide isn't really necessary but, if you want one, you shouldn't pay more than $15.

## Tour Operators

Any dives that go into the park do not include park fees, which are $3 per person.

There are dozens of tour operators at the dock waiting for customers. In fact it's like walking the gauntlet getting past them. Even though their prices are good, their tours are questionable. If you are not part of the cruise crowd, visit one of the inland operators.

Those enjoying any watersports around Cozumel must be aware of the strong currents. Do not swim/snorkel or anything else that might land you in the water without a life jacket. Not only are the currents strong but they are varied; one moment they push you one way and the next another.

**CP Rentals**, Av Juárez #2 and Av 10 North, ☎ 878-4055 or 872-5387, www.islacozumel.net/services/2000, has both cars and scooters for rent. Their website says if you print out the page they will guarantee those prices. The cheapest I could get was $50 a day for a Volkswagen and $25 a day for a scooter. Insurance adds a bit more. They are friendly and this is a family-run business.

**Sea Scuba**, Av Juárez between Calle 10 & 15, ☎ 872-5744, www.cozumel-diving.net/seascuba, offers diving and snorkeling tours. A two-tank tour is $60-$90 depending on where you go and when. Snorkel trips are $35 for 2½ hours. Sea Scuba runs fishing tours as well and they have some rental gear. They can also arrange hotel/dive packages.

**Studio Blue**, Adolfo Salas #200 and 6th St, ☎ 872-4414, www.cozumel-diving.net/studio-blue, has the best reputation for diving safety and ecological sensitivity. They are often booked solid so make reservations early. A two-tank morning dive is $60 and includes equipment. A three-tank all-day dive is $90 with a minimum of four people, and a two-tank twilight dive is $85 with a minimum of three people. Snorkel tours for 2½ hours are $35 and for 4½ hours are $45. For two-cave dives, with a maximum of six divers, it's $90. Morning dives leave at 9 am, afternoon dives leave at 1 pm and evening dives leave at 6 pm. They carry a large range of equipment for rent or sale and can arrange hotel/dive packages.

## Nightlife

Besides **Señor Frogs** at 65th & Hidalgo, and the wide variety of bars around the Plaza, Cozumel doesn't have that much nightlife. The general atmosphere after the cruise crowd leaves is *tranquilo*.

**Viva Mexico**, Rafael Melgar and Calle 3, ☎ 872-0799, opens 11 am to 2 am daily. There is a loudspeaker blasting out Latin music most nights. You can sip cool tequila cocktails and snack on appetizers while meeting other international travelers. This is the best late night bar.

**Neptuno Cozumel**, Rafael Melgar & Calle 11, $5 cover charge, open 5 pm until dawn, can hold up to 600 people. It features the best sound equipment on the island and it has huge screens where you can watch sports or old videos. There is a light and laser show every night and live entertainment is sometimes offered.

## Shopping

There are shops all around the Plaza selling almost everything you will find anywhere else in Mexico. Many stores near the Punta Langosta Pier where the cruise crowd arrives are duty-free, high-priced and designed for those not having time to search for a bargain. Be aware that the diamond market on Cozumel, contrary to what the cruise ship directors tell passengers, is not a source of good deals.

Shops generally open 9 am-2 pm and 5-10 pm daily. Black coral is still sold on the island but remember that it is endangered. Dropping the demand (not buying) will help preserve this slow-growing creature.

**Los Cinco Soles**, Av Rafael Melgar and Calle 8, has furniture and most notably pure vanilla ($6/half-liter). There is no bartering here.

**The Arte Factory**, Av 30 between Calle 2 & 4, ☎ 236-1860, www.balamarte.com, is a great art store where you can get feather art for reasonable prices. This art is unique and not found everywhere. It is a skill that has been practiced for hundreds of years.

**Woody's Love Stop**, Av 11 #101, corner of 5th Av, ☎ 869-1869, open Monday to Saturday, 10 am-10 pm. It's the first sex shop in Cozumel. I didn't check it out but maybe I should have!

# Hotels

Cozumel has well over 50 hotels, from no star to five. Most of the family-run ones in the center of town are wonderful little places that specialize in courtesy and cleanliness. But they are seldom full, as the island caters more to the cruise crowd.

| HOTEL PRICE CHART | |
|---|---|
| Cost per night for two before tax | |
| $ | Under $50 |
| $$ | $51-$100 |
| $$$ | $101-$175 |
| $$$$ | $176-$250 |
| $$$$$ | Over $250 |

**Hotel Pepita**, 15th Av South #120, ☎ 872-0098, $, is three blocks from the main Plaza. The hotel is clean, quiet, and friendly and has great air conditioning. Recommended.

*Hotel Pepita*

**La Casona Real**, Av Juárez #501, between 25th & 30th north, ☎ 872-5471, $$, has 16 large rooms decorated in a traditional Mexican motif. There is a comfortable courtyard with a pool. This is a family-run business and hospitality is their specialty.

**Hotel El Marques**, Av 5 South #180, ☎ 872-0677, www.cozumel-hotels.net/el_marques, $$, is a three-story building on the Plaza. Each front room has a balcony overlooking the action. There is a bar and laundry service.

**Hacienda San Miguel**, Calle 10 North #1500 between Av 5 and Rafael Melgar, ☎ 872-1986, www.haciendasanmiguel.com, $$/$$$, has both studios and suites in a lovely colonial building. The service is exceptional. Continental breakfast is included. The lush vegetation in the grounds is superb. Clean, well maintained and comfortable.

*Bedroom at Vista del Mar*

**Vista Del Mar**, Rafael Melgar #45, between Calles 5 & 7 South, ☎ 872-0545,

www.hotelvistadelmar.com, $$$, is another quaint boutique hotel that is family-owned and -operated. Clean and comfortable.

**Hotel Plaza Cozumel**, Calle 2 North #3, ☎ 872-2700, www.hotelplazacozumel.com, $$$, has a pool, restaurant, air conditioning and cable. The service is friendly and the hotel is safe. It's close to the Plaza.

**Villa Blanca**, Km 3, Coastal Highway, ☎ 872-0314, www.villablanca.net/, $$$, is a beachfront hotel with 50 rooms. They have a pool, Jacuzzi, poolside bar, tennis court, restaurant, snack bar and three dive shops, plus Internet, a gym, and wheelchair access.

**Casa del Mar,** Km 4, Coastal Highway, ☎ 872-1922, www.casadelmarcozumel.com, $$$/$$$$, has 98 Mexican-styled rooms with huge picture windows looking onto a lush garden complete with fountain. Other rooms look onto the Caribbean. The restaurant is open from 7 am to 11 pm daily. There is a Jacuzzi, tennis court, beach area, pool, game room, and sundeck, with lounges overlooking the ocean. However, some rooms are not up to snuff. Don't book ahead.

*Casa del Mar*

*Pool at Hotel Presidente Intercontinental*

**Hotel Presidente Intercontinental**, Km 6.5 on the Coastal Highway, ☎ 872-0322, www.ichotelsgroup.com, $$$$. Like Hotel Presidentes anywhere in the world, they are excellent in price, architecture and decor, location, and services. These include (to name a few) gym, pool, spa, sauna, whirlpool, scuba diving, water sports, tennis, live entertainment, gift shop, children's babysitting and business center. Although service animals are permitted to enter at

*Wyndham Cozumel Resort*

no extra cost, pets are permitted only if they are under 35 pounds. For these you must pay an extra $50.

**Wyndham Cozumel Resort** (previously the Reef Club), Km 12.9 on the Coastal Highway, ☎ 872-9311, $$$$$, has been face-lifted according to Wyndham specs, which is an improvement. This is an all-inclusive resort, ideal for families but also with an adults-only section. The 400+ rooms have access to three pools, tennis courts, fitness center, kayaks, snorkel equipment and windsurfing boards. Motorized sports are extra. There are spots just for kids (and teens), nightly entertainment and excellent food served in four restaurants, although some of the service is not at North American speed.

**Occidental Grand Cozumel**, Km 17.5 Coastal Highway, ☎ 872-9730, www.occidentalhotels.com, $$$$$, is the most expensive all-inclusive hotel I found on Cozumel. There are six restaurants, four bars and a nightclub serving guests from the 250 rooms. The architecture is very Mexican with bright colors and heavy wood furniture. The hotel is on Playa San Francisco, a long stretch of white sand.

*Occidental Grand*

## Restaurants

There are over 90 restaurants and cafés on the island, including Burger King, McDonalds, Hard Rock Café, Dominos, Señor Frogs and the Pizza Hut.

**Plaza Leza**, Calle 1 south #58 or Rafael Melgar and 5th, ☎ 872-1041, open 7 am-11 pm daily. Yucatán food is the specialty and a good meal of fish will cost no more than $10. There is an inside patio but the preferred tables are on the deck overlooking the street and the water.

**Prima**, Av Rosado Salas, #109, ☎ 872-2477, open 4-11 pm daily. Reservations are recommended. This is one of the best Italian restaurants on the Maya Riviera, offering Northern Italian cooking done in a brick oven. The pasta is home-made and the wine cellar is huge.

**Pepe's Steak and Seafood**, Av Melgar & A.R. Salas, ☎ 872-0213, open 5 pm-11 pm daily. Pepe's, owned by Eduardo Ruiz, started at this location with four tables. The owner spoke numerous languages and had a charismatic personality, not to mention good food. People came. He expanded. More came. He expanded again. His specialty is prime rib and lobster ($30) with a fine red wine (not included). But sadly, Pepe needs to move from charm and return to quality again. He is very popular with the cruise crowd.

**Panchos Backyard**, Av Rafeal Melgar and Calle 6 north, ☎ 869-6126, has a relaxed Mexican atmosphere with an indoor and outdoor patio area. The food is very good – chicken is the best, for $12. I've also heard of people drinking directly from the kegs – but that's a bit risky as far as I'm concerned so I didn't try it.

## Paamul

You encounter Paamul heading south from Cozumel on the Cancún-Chetumal Highway.

**Paamul RV Site**, Km 85 Cancún-Tulum Highway and 11 miles (18 km) south of Playa, ☎ 971-222-3512 (in the US only), www.rvinmexico.com, is for long- and short-term RV visitors. It costs $25 to park an RV, $10 for tenting. There is a pool, cable TV, phone service and laundry. Some trailers, shaded by palapas, are for sale. Ten small bungalows, without air conditioning, dot the white sand and go for $75 per night. There's a calm beach and good snorkeling. The restaurant is open from 8 am to 10 pm daily and serves almost anything Mexican.

The name means "destroyed ruin." The beach is nicer at the south end of the bay, but because of exposed rocks you should wear water shoes of some type. This is a turtle egg-laying beach and it's a pity it's dotted with garbage. The fully supplied dive shop offers dive tours but no snorkeling.

# Puerto Aventuras

Puerto Aventuras is a gated community with luxury resorts, private condominiums and a few upscale B&Bs. The deepest marina along the coast is here and the village has a full-service dock.

The community has three white-sand bays that allow jet skiing, water skiing, and wind surfing. Fishing, diving and snorkeling can be arranged in the town. The marina waterfront has souvenir shops selling a wide variety of goods. Also along the water are numerous fine-dining restaurants.

## What to See & Do

### On Horseback

**Captain Rick's Sport Fishing Office**, located just past the Omni Hotel, ☎ 873-5035, offers a four-hour jungle horseback ride that includes snorkeling in a cenote and a picnic lunch. The horses are healthy and happy. Capt. Rick also offers sport-fishing tours.

### In the Air

**Parasailing**, at the marina, ☎ 873-5108, costs $45 per person. This company has a 31-foot (10-meter) boat to pull you into the air for a thrilling ride over the bay.

### On & Under Water

The coral reef is just 300 feet (100 m) from shore and divers can go down to two platforms, one at 60 feet (20 m) and the other at 120 feet (40 m). You can also go to **Tortugas Reef**, just 15 minutes offshore where the reef is about 70 feet (22 m) deep. This is an exciting dive where turtles and barracudas are often encountered. Cenotes (see pages 204-205) can be reached from here with a tour company or in your own car. Almost anywhere there is reef, snorkeling is good.

Fishing for sailfish, marlin and tuna is best from March to the end of June. King mackerel, dorado and barracuda are best caught from July to the end of September. Barracuda, snapper, grouper and sharks are around all the time, just waiting for your lure.

A **Sunset Sailing Cruise** is offered every evening on a 46-foot (15-m) catamaran. These cruises are available at the marina.

**Dolphin Discovery**, at the marina, ☎ 849-4748, open 9 am-6 pm daily, offers numerous interactive programs with playful dolphins, celebrity manatees and comical stingrays. Reservations recommended. The cost

depends on what you do. The Dolphin Royal Swim is $149 per person and can be done at 9 and 11 am or 1 and 3 pm daily. The Swim Adventure (kisses, touching and dancing close) is just $99 per person and can be done at the same time as the Royal Swim. But for $200 per person, you can spend up to three hours playing in the tanks with all the animals. Children under eight are not permitted to participate and those between eight and 12 must be accompanied by a paying adult.

## On the Links

**Puerto Aventuras Golf Course**, Km 90 Chetumal-Cancún Highway, ☎ 873-5109, is a nine-hole, par-32, Thomas Leman course that opens at 7:30 am daily all year round. Green fees are $80 for 18 holes and include an electric cart. There is a clubhouse where you can purchase drinks, golf balls, hats, shirts, clubs and accessories. Carts are not mandatory and reservations are not necessary.

*Puerto Aventuras Golf Course*

## Tour Operators

Most hotels have tour operators who also work with the private companies. They do this by combining their tours so all boats/vehicles are full or as close to full as possible.

**Akumal Dive Center**, north end of beach, ☎ 875-9025, www.akumaldivecenter.com, offers snorkeling, scuba diving, cenote diving, fishing trips and diving instructions. They have three dives per day, leaving at 9:30 and 11:30 am or 2:30 pm daily. They have a night dive and twice a week they go to the park at Cozumel. There is a minimum of four persons per dive.

**Captain Glen Fishing Charters**, ☎ 873-5513, www.chartermexico.com, has four boats. The cost is $375 for half a day and $650 for a full eight hours of excitement on the smaller boats (four people) or $450 for half a day and $800 for a full day on the larger boat (six people).

**Riviera Maya Parasail**, Main Marina (across from the Omni Hotel), ☎ 873-5683, www.snubamexico.com, offers tandem ($55 per person) or solo ($65 per person) 12- to 15-minute parasailing trips. Their catamaran

day-trips run from $600 for 10 people for four hours up to $1,200 for 50 guests. Besides being a very good company to deal with, they are very prompt to answer any questions. Feel free to contact them (from their website) with any questions I have not answered.

## Nightlife

Most all-inclusives offer nightly entertainment. This is fine for a night or two, but occasionally, one must get away and find something new. There are a few bars along the beach for a get-a-way and a quiet sipping session.

**Mi Barco**, at the marina near the Oasis Hotel, is a large boat that was confiscated from a drug dealer. It sat in the marina for years before the present owners decided to make it into an interesting bar. Be sure to stop in for a drink. Word is the previous owner will not be back to reclaim his boat.

## Shopping

**Lapis Jewelry Factory**, across the highway from Puerto Aventura in the sand-colored Turkish-styled building, ☎ 803-2078, www.jewelry-lapis.com, originated in Istanbul in 1974. They became so well known that they spread to other countries. Lapis offers a combination of quality-designed jewelry embedded with precious and semi-precious stones, including blue and yellow diamonds. They also offer handmade oriental carpets (by far my preference). You can design your own jewelry.

Small shops are located near the marina, where you can find souvenirs, clothing and food stores.

## Hotels

There are 12 luxury resorts, plus a few smaller places in Puerta Aventura (this gated community). The difference between them is negligible but you must check the latest reports before booking. The restaurants in the all-inclusives will take outsiders.

| HOTEL PRICE CHART | |
|---|---|
| Cost per night for two before tax | |
| $ | Under $50 |
| $$ | $51-$100 |
| $$$ | $101-$175 |
| $$$$ | $176-$250 |
| $$$$$ | Over $250 |

**Barcelo Maya Beach/Garden**, ☎ 875-5000/875-1500, $$$$/$$$$$, www.barcelo.com, are two upper-end all-inclusive resorts set on a few miles of white sand beach. Together, they offer almost 1,000 rooms with all luxury amenities included. Residents have access to 14 restaurants, two theaters,

three tennis courts, a spa and fitness center, a mini-golf course, a gym, a game room and a fleet of non-motorized watercraft. The pools are huge and attractive, the beach delightful.

**Omni Aventuras**, ☎ 875-1958, www.omnihotels.com, $$$$$, is a high-end, all-inclusive luxury resort. Rooms have balconies with private Jacuzzis and hammocks, individual climate controls, and lots of space – 395 square feet for the oversized rooms. They bring a continental breakfast to your room each morning. There is the fitness center, 24-hour medical service, two pools plus a kids' pool, dive shop and on-site parking. They have an Ideal Nourishment Program and Get Fit Rooms where you can sweat out your physical ailments in private. There are two restaurants and two bars, plus you have the option of dining in your room – for a charge of course. There are some great extras like a swimsuit spinner in the locker room, free hydrotherapy, great massages and free tennis lessons. This resort has the #1 reputation in Aventuras.

*Omni Aventuras*

Be aware that if you pay for everything before you leave your home, you will not be able to change hotels, regardless of how badly misrepresented your resort of choice has been. I hear over and over about unexpected problems like a non-existent but paid-for room or a five-star price being paid for a no-star accommodation.

**Cameleon Marival**, ☎ 848-7510, $$$$$, has 524 spacious guest rooms and a spa/fitness center. The five pools are large and the safe deposit boxes cost extra if you use them. The six international restaurants serve well-prepared meals, some extraordinary, but the hotel has concentrated most of its efforts around activities designed to keep youngsters, sullen teens, honeymooners and retirees happy.

*Cameleon Marival*

**El Dorado Seaside Suites**, Km 95, ☎ 875-1910, $$$$$, has 280 adults-only, luxury rooms, all with four-poster canopy beds to add to the romance. The

best rooms are in the newer section. The food and service is upscale but not exceptional, considering that this is one of the most expensive places in PA.

Beaches have been destroyed throughout the Yucatán by Hurricane Wilma and the hotels are doing their best to rectify this but it can't be done overnight. Bring water shoes.

**Sunscape Puerto Aventuras**, ☎ 875-3000, $$$$$, www.sunscape-resorts.com, claims clients need not wear the irritating wristbands nor make reservations at the specialty restaurants. For activities you can bicycle, kayak, play tennis or join in aerobics. There is a fitness center, a 30-person Jacuzzi and two pools, one adults-only. There is also a saltwater lagoon to play in. The hotel offers some good "deals" during off-season. Check their websites for this.

*Sunscape*

**Casa del Agua**, ☎ 873-5184, www.casadelagua.com, is beyond my scale at almost $1,000 per night for a room. The maximum number of people they take are 10 at any one time for a minimum of three day's stay. There are no pets or smoking allowed, but kids are allowed. The price includes breakfast, and a staff of five at your beck and call, including one butler. There's turndown service (I'd expect the bed to be warmed for this price!) and security. Tennis, golf equipment, kayaks and snorkeling gear are also part of the package. The place is exquisite, with handcrafted furniture, Mexican tile and hardwood decor, not to mention a private beach.

*Casa del Agua*

## Restaurants

Most hotels here are all-inclusive so a restaurant section may be irrelevant to most visitors. However, you may want some variety, in which case there are many places to choose from.

**Papaya Republic**, ☎ 873-5029, open daily at 11 am, is a seafood eatery on the beach. The ambiance is casual, the food is fresh and the quantity is good, for around $10 a plate.

**Café Café** at the marina, ☎ 873-5728, opens from 8 am to 8 pm daily, www.cafecafe-pa.com. It offers good coffee (often hard to come by in coffee-growing countries) and the best desserts on the coast to go with it. They also have high-speed Internet.

**Paco Taco**, next to the Premex Gas Station (no phone available), doesn't open until 11 am (if you can wait till then it's well worth it) and has the best shrimp tacos in the Yucatán. Paco is so well known that locals drive long distances just to get his food.

**Italian Bakery**, on the Plaza, open 8 am, is popular for its French toast, ice cream and the best pizza in town.

# Xpu-Há

Xpu-Há is a quiet little settlement just three miles (five km) south of Puerto Aventuras with five all-inclusive resorts on the beach, a few small restaurants and one dive shop in the center. There is also mini-golf and a gas station. The beaches are maintained by the resorts so private, non-paying visitors are discouraged from enjoying the area.

**Golfito Duck Putt** is a mini-golf, Internet, cafeteria, mini-mart. I love the name. It's on the beach next to the Catalonia Royal Tulum. Open 8:30 am to 7 pm, but closed for siesta between 2 and 5 pm.

## Hotels

**Catalonia Royal Tulum**, ☎ 875-1800, $$$, is a family-styled all-inclusive with 288 rooms and one large pool, plus a kids' pool, kiddie club, and four Jacuzzis. Night-time entertainment is not compulsory. You can play billiards, ping pong, volley ball, and darts or you can take dance lessons. There are boogie boards, kayaks, pedal boats and water polo. A total of 10 restaurants and bars are available

*Catalonia Royal Tulum*

for you. This was the Copacabana before it fell under new management, which has greatly improved the facilities.

*Grand Flamenco Xcaret*

**Grand Flamenco Xcaret**, ☎ 871-5400, $$$$$, offers some extras other resorts don't, such as archery, mini-golf, steam room, and whirlpool. Although the 770 rooms are fairly large and comfortable, they offer nothing exceptional. There are 11 restaurants and 10 bars. Visiting one of each per day would take most of your vacation.

**Club Tulum**, once Robinson's Club, is now being renovated. As of writing time, there was no start-up date available.

## Restaurant

**Al Cielo**, ☎ 840-9012, is located between the two gates of Xpu-Há. The restaurant is open for lunch and dinner only and is especially known for the good wine selection that complements the fresh seafood dinners ($20). Friday and Saturday afternoons from 3-7 pm, there is live music. Reservations are a must. Al Cielo also has four rooms for rent ($200+ per night) made with local hardwood and palapa roofs. The cabañas that overlook the Caribbean are decorated with sheer mosquito netting over the beds.

# Tulum

Tulum is where the third-most popular ruins in the Yucatán are located. The Maya built here because of the area's aesthetic beauty and strategic importance; on a cliff overlooking the Caribbean. If you do nothing else in Tulum, visiting the ruins is a must.

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# Getting Here & Around

The Tulum/Cancún highway passes the road leading to the ruins and then continues a bit farther south to the village of Tulum. The ruins are 1.2 miles (two km) toward the ocean from the highway and you can drive and park there. If taking a bus, they will drop you off on the highway and you will have to walk or take a taxi to the ruins themselves. There are small hotels, restaurants and jungle along the road. Buses pass by along the Tulum/Cancún Highway every hour going north or south until 5 pm.

Two km south of the ruins, there are numerous huts along the beach. Some are very basic, most are quite inexpensive and all are romantic. They have white sand for a lawn, bamboo stick walls (some have plaster halfway up) and thatch roofs. The breeze is noticeable, thus making the heat bearable.

See page 129 for details on the ruins.

# What to See & Do

## Adventures Underground

See cave descriptions under Playa del Carmen for those along the Cobá Road. Cave maps are available at most offices of tour operators.

**Cenote Naharon** is two miles (three km) south of Tulum along the Tulum/Cancún highway (#307) and on the west side of the road. Open from 8 am to 5 pm daily, entry fee is $5 per person. The sign says Cenote Cristal, even though the cave is dark due to the black walls. The most popular trip is to the saltwater layer about 80 feet (25 m) down. The saltwater layer is off the Desconocido Dome line.

**Mayan Blue**, directly across the road from Naharon, is a complex system of tunnels and rooms that would take a week to explore. There are three entrances – one at the beginning, one midway and one at the far end. There are rumors that this downstream cave system connects with Ox Bel Há but at time of writing, the connection was still a rumor. The saltwater layer, white in color, is down about 80 feet (25 m).

## Adventures on Water

**Yalku**, entry fee $3, is a rocky inlet reached by boat or road. If driving, follow the main highway north to Akumal Caribe road. Turn right and follow this for five miles (eight km) to the first dirt

road heading north. Follow the dirt road to the ocean. Bird watching, snorkeling and skinny-dipping are recommended. The worst possible danger is being charged by damselfish, that do this when threatened. Coming here without snorkel gear would be a great travesty because the wildlife is so abundant. If you do not have a car to reach Yalku, take a bus to Akumal just north of Xel-Há and hire a boat. Bring everything you need. There are no services.

## Theme Park

**Xel-Há**, ☎ 883-0524 (Cancún) or 803-1298 (Playa), www.xel-ha.com, is a popular water park where you can explore creeks, lagoons, cenotes and

underground rivers. It is an all-inclusive entertainment center starting at $75 per adult per day and $50 for children. However, there are events and activities that are not included in this basic entry fee such as the dolphin swim. Meals are at any of the six restaurants. The park opens daily at 9 am and closes between 5 and 6 pm, depending on the time of year. Public buses running between Cancún and Tulum/Chetumal stop at the gates. If staying in Tulum, you would pay less than $10 to get to Xel-Há. Picture ID and $20 deposit are required for towels, locker and snorkel gear.

*Swimming with the dolphins at Xel-Há*

The park is designed around an inlet so it appears quite jungle-like. There are hammocks, a children's playground, a massage center, viewpoints, an apiary, a plant nursery, a floating bridge and a Mayan cave. You can use bicycles, kayaks or shuttle buses to and from main points. There are interpretive paths through the jungle and to the "cliff of courage," where you get the chance to jump into the water from a very high elevation. All meals and drinks are included in the basic price. Snorkel gear and inner tubes are available. Mexican tourists love this place so if you're intent on doing something like swimming with dolphins, you must come early and book immediately. In fact, coming early is crucial. You can always leave early if you've had enough but, if you come late, they won't stay open just so you have time to see it all.

## Nightlife

For the most part, the nightlife here is pretty laid-back – you need Cancún or Playa for action. However, walk along the south beach, especially on weekends, and you will hear music intended to attract visitors. Go in and party. During the week a quiet drink outside your closest bar with a gecko for company is about as exciting as it gets.

# Shopping

There are crafts and craft stores along the access road to the ruins and in town. Barter a little and smile a lot.

# Hotels

**Hotel Latino**, Calle Andromeda #2013, ☎ 871-2674, www.hotel-latino.com, $$, has eight rooms in the village center. There is a pool, lounge, terrace and hammocks around the terrace. They can arrange tours and they offer bicycles so you can visit the ruins.

| HOTEL PRICE CHART | |
|---|---|
| Cost per night for two before tax | |
| $ | Under $50 |
| $$ | $51-$100 |
| $$$ | $101-$175 |
| $$$$ | $176-$250 |
| $$$$$ | Over $250 |

The three **Eco-Tulum** hotels listed below are ecologically conscious so if your comfort level needs five-star, this is not the place for you. However, what they are doing is promoting the "Give a Toy, Get a Smile" program. Guests from around the world have donated new toys, day packs, and clothing to be distributed to families with children suffering from HIV or mental, physical or emotional problems, as well as to orphans and those living in extreme isolation. In 2007 they distributed 242 new toys for children between the ages of six months and 18 years. You may want to include a gift in your luggage when you leave home.

Eco-Tulum brings in specialists throughout the year who offer sessions and workshops on subjects such as Shiatsu, Aromatherapy, Tarot Readings, Nahuatl Herbal Medicine and Sexology. The specialists have traveled and studied in Europe, Asia, South America and India. For those interested in holistic life styles, this hotel should be considered. They also have a new website, www.EcoTrotters.com, with interesting tips and suggestions for a greener life.

**Cabañas Copal Hotel**, ☎ 877-8447, $$, www.cabanascopal.com, is a liberal, clothes-optional resort on the beach. It is just two miles (three km) from the ruins. Because it is part of Eco-Tulum group (see paragraph above), solar power is replacing the gas-generated electricity or candles. There is a small generator at the restaurant and bar. Propane heats the water, which is brought in by trucks and stored in ground-level tanks. Neighbors are iguanas, hermit crabs and geckos. Occasional guests are raccoons and tejons (little badgers). Feeding wildlife is discouraged. There are nets around the beds to impede other freeloaders from enjoying

your blood. If you have an aversion to wildlife or insects, this may not be the place for you. They do not offer refunds because you freaked out at geckos. I love the place!

*Cabañas Copal Hotel*

**Azulik Villas**, ☎ 880-5629/880-6022, $$$$$, www.azulik.com, is a bit upscale and specializes in spa services. There is a concierge who checks the 15 cabins every hour between 8 am and 10 pm to see if your flag is up outside your cabin. If so, he stops to see how he can help. The spa offers massage therapy including clay massage, facials, body scrubs and hair therapy (that's a new one!). You can have reiki treatments or a copal sweat lodge treatment or you can nestle in the dry flotation tank. The cabins are thatch and hardwood with no electricity or telephone, although there is wireless Internet. The tiny private pools outside each cabin overlooking the ocean are a big draw.

Once you've been pounded and kneaded into soft dough from your massage, you can snorkel, kayak (gear is provided) or hike through the jungle looking for the scary howler monkeys. And, of course, there's the ruin just a few steps away. You can also order a quiet dinner on your balcony, though the food is not included in the basic price of your cabin and is a bit pricey: $2 for a coffee and $17 for fajitas.

*Azulik Villas*

**Zahra Hotel**, 3.6 miles (six km) south of the ruins, www.zahra.com/.mx, $$/$$$, is the third of the three Eco-Tulum resorts and it too is rustic. This

*Zahra Hotel*

complex has 22 cabins with electricity until 11 pm. The cabins are thatch-roofed, Maya-styled buildings, some on stilts. There is a good restaurant and bar here and an air-conditioned Internet café.

**Dos Ceibas**, Km 10 Tulum-Boca Paila Road, ☎ 877-6024, $$/$$$/$$$$, www.dosceibas.com/about/index.html, has numerous stone and thatch bungalows just 30 feet (10 m) from the beach and tucked into lush jungle vegetation. The bungalows are clean and comfortable, serviced by friendly staff and guarded by the friendliest dog in the country.

**Hotel Acuario**, Cross Roads to the ruins, ☎ 871-2195, $$, www.hotelacuariotulum.com, has six basic, small but comfortable rooms close to the ruins. There is a restaurant and bar on site.

# Restaurants

Because of the heat and humidity most people don't even think of eating before sunset. After dark, the streets in town come alive with visitors looking for some action and food. Always remember that an empty restaurant (unless it's closed) means a sore stomach.

**El Mirador** is on the Coastal Road, on your left, about a third of a mile (half a km) from the ruins. ☎ 876-2810, open from 8 am to 9 pm daily. They have nachos covered in refried beans, salsa, guacamole and cheese, which you can eat along with a cold beer ($8). They can't be beat. Grilled fish and frajitas are also recommended. This is a very laid-back place so don't expect fast service. The upstairs is open-air while downstairs is a bit more elegant. The restaurant overlooks the ocean.

**Don Cafeto**, 64 Tulum Road, ☎ 505-1713, open 7 am to 11 pm daily. This has been in town for years and has remained a popular spot for locals and tourists. Great for lunch or supper, the mole dishes are recommended and cost about $10. They often have live music.

**El Tacoqueto**, end of Tulum Av, is open 8 am to 10 pm daily (no phone available); it's the brightest place in town, with the most affordable meals. They also serve the best mango smoothies (*liquidos*) in town for $3. Good Mexican food, such as their beef stew, should be eaten with them. If you

don't know what you want to eat, you may be asked to go into the kitchen and see what they have cooking. This is a very popular place.

# Chetumal

The border town of Chetumal is the capital of Quintana Roo State and at the most southern section of the Yucatán Peninsula. The mouth of the Rio Hondo is also here.

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Those coming and going to Belize can change buses or stop for one night, while others may come to shop. It's a pity so few stay longer because there are numerous interesting ruins within a day's journey, the local museum and botanical gardens are good and the **Lagoon of Seven Colors** is just 20 miles (37 km) from the town center. The **Bacalar Lagoon**, the second-largest in Mexico, is about the same distance away. Just offshore are the **Chinchorro reefs**, known for their rusting shipwrecks. If you're interested in some of these things, away from the party scene of Cancún and adjacent communities, then I encourage you to stay longer.

*Chetumal (Battroid)*

Chetumal is the only city I've ever been to where a taxi driver refused to take me because the distance I wanted to go was too short. He then proceeded to give me directions for the quickest way to walk where I wanted to go.

# History

Chetumal in Maya means "a place with lots of red cedar" and the Maya populated the Chetumal and Balcalar Lagoon area for a few hundred years. The first non-Maya to live here was the shipwrecked Spaniard, Gonzolo Guerrero, who married the chief's daughter. He later became interpreter for the Spanish.

Chetumal became an official city in 1898 to house the military that was fighting the illegal trade of arms and illegal transportation of logwood lumber during and after the Caste War. In 1898 General Orthon Blanco arrived and established the border with Belize. In 1915 Bishop Payo arrived from Guatemala and the town was named Payo Obispo after him. Following this, the village remained a sleepy little place, its architecture influenced by the British, who occupied Belize, just a few miles to the south. Finally in 1936, the town's name changed back to its original Maya one, Chetumal.

During the 1940s two hurricanes demolished the town but the locals rebuilt. In 1955, Hurricane Janet leveled Chetumal and killed 800 people. Then Hurricane Dean blew through in 2007, causing extensive damage to Majahual and flooding to Chetumal. As it crossed land, Dean weakened but then picked up force again once it went over the Gulf of Mexico.

**Corozal**, on the Belize border, became a Duty Free Zone and catered to businesses seeking bargains. It became a bustling port, but only for foreigners. Those carrying Belizean passports weren't allowed to shop at the duty-free stores unless they had a visa to go farther north than Chetumal. Thus, visitors often shopped in Corozal, spent a night or two in Chetumal and then returned home with their bargains. Chetumal quickly made itself into the perfect destination for overnight Belizeans.

# Getting Here & Around

The city, with a population of about 140,000 people, is on the western side of the Bay of Chetumal, a huge Caribbean inlet that also holds the island of **Tamalcab**. To the east and inland, the city is surrounded by **Lagunas Guerrero**, **Agual Salada**, and **Bacalar**. **Cenote Azul** is also close. The main road, **Insurgentes**, interjects the main highway. Follow Insurgentes to the city center and the town Plaza. From there,

Chetumal
to Av Insurgentes & Plaza de los Americas
To Bus Station, Tourist Office & Calderitas
CIRCUNVALACIÓN
CARRANZO
AV. PRIMO DE VERDAD
CRISTÓBAL COLÓN
MAHATMA GANDHI
HÉROES DE CHAPULTEPEC
LÁZARO CÁRDENAS
PLUTARCO ELIAS CALLES
IGNACIO ZARAGOZA
ALVARO OBREGÓN
OTHÓN P BLANCO
CARMEN OCHOA DE MERINO
22 DE ENERO
BOULEVARD BAHÍA (MALECÓN)
AV. DE LOS HÉROES
AV. 16 DE SEPTIEMBRE
AV. MIGUEL HIDALGO
CALZADO VERACRUZ
GEN FELIPE ANGELES
GEN FRANCISCO J MÚJICA
GEN HERIBERTO
FELIPE CARILLO PUERTO
BELISARIO DOMÍNGUEZ
JUAN ESCUITA
JUAN DE LA BARRERA
AUGSTIN MELGAR
FRANCISCO MÁRQUEZ
FRANCISCO MONTES
AV. FRANCISCO I MODERO
AV. INDEPENDENCIA
AV. BENITO JUÁREZ
AV. 5 DE MAYO
AV. REFORMA
CALZADA VERACRUZ
AV. COZUMEL
Bellas Artes/City Museum
Mercado
City Museum
ATM
ATM
Post Office
Maqueta Payo Obispo
to Airpo & Canc
1
2
3
4
5
1. Los Cocos Hotel/Holiday Inn
2. Casa Blanca
3. Express Café
4. El Fenicio
5. Pantoja Restaurant
Bahía de Chetumal
800 FEET
400 METERS
NOT TO SCALE
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follow Av Niños Heroes east to the municipal pier. The Malecón follows the bay around the town.

## Transportation

Mexican cars are not permitted to enter Belize without special insurance. However, if you choose to take a Mexican car into Belize, you will find the cost about the same as renting in Belize.

**ADO buses** leave from Chetumal for Cancún at 5 and 8:30 am or 2:30 and 8 pm daily. They stop first in Majajual, in Limones, at the car ferry, in Tulum and in Playa. There are 2nd- and 3rd-class buses and some vans that go more frequently. The cost for an ADO is $16 from Chetumal to Cancún.

**Premier** is a new bus company offering first-class service between Belize City and Chetumal. They leave Chetumal at 10:45 am or 3 and 4:45 pm. It takes three hours to reach Belize City. Check these schedules as they can and do change often.

Those going to Belize should know that there is a shuttle to the border from the bus station. You must walk across the border. Every time you leave Belize you must pay a $30 per person "Conservation Fee" and the border personnel are not too friendly with those passing their gates to leave the country.

# What to See & Do

**Museo de la Cultura Maya**, Av Heroes, ☎ 832-6838, open Tuesday to Sunday, 9 am to 7 pm, entry fee $5 for adults, $2 for children. It is partly an interactive museum featuring Mexican, Belizean, Guatamalan and Honduran Maya culture. The museum explains mostly the simplest aspects of the culture such as the idea of beauty through deformation of the head and through body scarring. There are numerous models of Maya ruins found in the region, examples of wall paintings and some intricate wood carvings. The modern sculpture outside the museum is of Guerrero and his Maya princess wife.

The Malecón runs along the bay and is graced with children's parks, palapa huts, palm trees, and gentle breezes that are enjoyed in typical Spanish style each night by those living and visiting Chetumal. Near the Palacio Legislativo, on Av Othon Blanco and the Malacón, is a house containing Maqueta Payo Olbispo, a handcarved rendition of Chetumal as it looked almost 100 years ago. Created by Luis Reinhard Mcliberty, a local who was good at miniature carving, the shoebox-sized houses, painted and decorated with curtained windows, lining streets complete with

signs and sand, are exact replicas of Chetumal back in the 1920s and 1930s.

**Bellas Artes**, Av Niños Heroes #68, ☎ 832-1350, open Tuesday to Sunday, 9 am to 7 pm, entry $2, is a 1936-styled building that houses the city museum and offers live performances in the evenings. There are six rooms, one showing the history of Payo Obispo depicted in full English colonial style. It moves through WWII, and then progresses to Chetumal's struggle after the destruction of Hurricane Janet in 1955.

**Zoological Museum**, Km 2 on the Bacalar-Chetumal road, ☎ 832-1666, $3 entry fee, displays over 75,000 specimens of fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds, mammals, butterflies, and insects. The museum is the first of its kind in Quintana Roo.



## Fiestas

*Carnival*

Besides the usual religious festivals such as Christmas, Easter and Day of the Dead, on the day after Shrove Tuesday in February **Carnival** begins. When this high-spirited all-out party ends, the 40 days of fasting for Lent begins. I'd guess that it's more a recuperation period.

October sees the **International Border Fair** and November has the **Festival of Caribbean Culture**.

## The Ruins & Other Attractions

The **Rio Bec Route** west of Chetumal starts off along Highway 186 (turn west off Highway 307 just north of Chetumal to reach 186). Sites are open from 8 am to 5 pm daily and cost $2-$4 per person. You may see some of the sites in one day but places like Calakmul not only take time to reach but also take hours to visit. The first ruin along Highway 186 is **Dzibanche**. The name means "writing on wood" and comes from the wood lintel still on building six. The date on the lintel is 733 AD. A tomb inside the Temple of the Owl belonged to one of the Maya queens. Along Highway 186, at Km 42, in the village of Francisco Villa, is the turnoff for

**Kohunlich Archeological Site**, just 4½ miles (nine km) from the village. The name is a bastardized version of Cohoon Ridge. The Spanish called the site *Aserradero*, which means sawmill. The ruin was first mapped by R E Merwin in 1912, but excavations didn't begin until 1968 after grave robbers were caught stealing a mask from the Temple of Masks, the most interesting building at the site. It comes from about the fifth century and is named for the six (five remain) masks that flank the staircase of the pyramid. Each mask is about five feet tall (1½ m) and depicts the Sun God dressed in feathered headdresses. The god is obviously portrayed after he's gone through some drug-taking ceremony, the effects of which can be seen in his spiral-like eyes. Some eyeholes have glyphs, one portraying the 260-day year. The cat-like mouths on the masks are topped with moustaches characteristic of some Olmec carvings. All masks have earrings and ear plugs.

*Becán*

The next ruin along Highway 186 is **Becán** (see page 100) and **Chicanna** follows. Becán was a large walled city and today has a few restored buildings. **Calakmul** (see page 101) is the most impressive ruin on the Rio Bec Route but also needs an entire day to visit. Just beyond the road to Calakmul is **Balmku**, with three sculpted figures descending into the mouths of mythological characters living in the underworld.

*Calakmul*

**Oxtankah**, 10 miles (16 km) north of Chetumal, is open 8 am to 5 pm daily, with a $3 entry fee. To get here follow Av Heroes north along the

bay for three miles (4½ km) and then turn left. There are signs indicating this archeological site. Follow the road for 5½ miles (11 km) to the ruin. The site was named after the ramon trees that grow abundantly in the area. Found by Alberto Escalona in 1937, it is believed to have been a prospering trade center around 600-200 BC. After its downfall the city went to ruin until Maya, in the 16th century, used the stones from the decaying platforms and pyramids to support new buildings or they added them onto old buildings. Architecturally, the buildings follow the Petén design, but what makes these more interesting than most is that you can compare two periods (see *History*, pages 2-9) sitting side by side (or on top of each other). All sites in the area are clamoring to be recognized as the home of Gonzalo Guerro and his Maya wife.

*Balmku*

**Filipe Carrillo Puerto**, at the intersection of Highway 153 and 308, north of Chetumal, was originally called Chan Santa Cruz and is the center of the "Speaking Cross," the driving force behind the Maya's strength during the Caste Wars (1847-1901). The museum and sanctuary, Calle 60 & 69, open 9 am to 4:30 pm daily, contains photos and documents about those who followed the Speaking Cross through the Caste Wars. There is very little left of the original monument built when the Maya heard the cross. The church on the Plaza was built in 1858. The town was renamed after a martyred governor who supported the Maya after the Caste Wars. Part of his story is as follows:

### LA PEREGRINA

During the 1920s Alma Reed, AKA Mrs Goodfellow, wrote a Dear Abby-type column for the *San Francisco Times* helping mostly poor Mexicans living in California with free legal advice. The family of a 17-year-old Mexican boy on San Quentin's death row appealed to Reed for help. She successfully campaigned to save the man's life. In appreciation, the Mexican president, Alvero Obregon invited her to visit Mexico. She did and was met at the train station by a government official. What she didn't know was that a Mexican businesswoman on the same train was being met by a mariachi band singing a greeting, "Alma de mi

Alma." Reed thought the song was for her. She was so moved she burst into tears.

Her visit continued and, when she arrived at the Yucatán, she met and fell in love with the Governor, Felipe Carrillo. He courted her in high Mexican fashion and they planned to marry. He met her family in San Francisco and while she made arrangements, he went home to take care of pressing political matters. But he'd heard the story of her tears at the train station so he wrote a romantic song, *La Peregrina*, for her. The first few lines are: "My wonderer with divine and clear eyes, with glowing rosy cheeks, little lady with the deeply glowing lips and a radiant face like the sun." He sent it to her.

Meanwhile, he was captured by enemy revolutionaries and shot. Before the captain of the firing squad called "fire!" Carrillo took a wedding ring out of his pocket and asked if he'd deliver it to his Peregrina. He did, although it took a year for Reed to learn about the death of her lover and receive the ring. She dedicated her life thereafter to writing and promoting ancient civilizations like the Maya.

## Excursions in Nature

**Isla Temalcab** can be reached by ferry from Calderitas on the Bay of Chetumal. The island is one mile (1.7 km) from shore. It is five miles (nine km) long and on the bay between the mouth of the rivers Hondo (border of Belize) and San José. People swim, snorkel and observe wildlife here. The island is home to tepescuintles (large rodents also known as pacas), tejones (a badger-type marsupial and an endangered species), monkeys, and birds such as herons, egrets, ospreys and eagles. Some mounds are unexcavated Maya ruins. There are no services. **Calderitas** is a small beach area with palapas and food stalls 3½ miles (eight km) north of Chetumal. To get here, travel north on Av Heroes and take the right hand fork at Km 6.5 leading toward the water. The beach is one km farther along. Fishermen can be hired at the docks to take you around the bay or over to Temalcab. A tour of the bay, depending on how many ride and for how long, would be about $100.

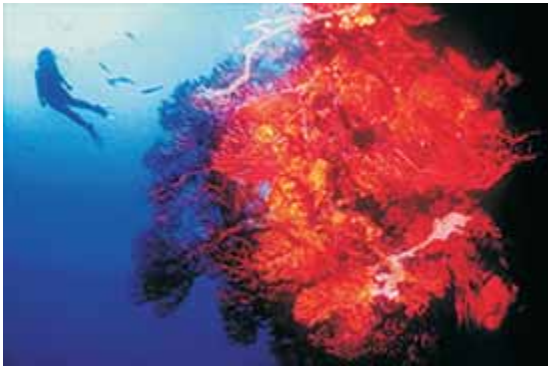
**Cenote del Cocodrilo Dorado** is 1.2 miles (two km) east of La Union on the banks of the Hondo River, across from Blue Creek, Belize. The cenote is a ground-level sinkhole almost 200 feet across, with limestone cliffs and a bat cave.

**Chinchorro Bank Reefs/Reserve** has the best diving in Mexico but the atoll is 20 miles (30 km) off the mainland from Majahual, which in turn is 12 miles (20 km) off Highway 307 and a total of 80 miles (130 km) from

*Chinchorro Reefs*

Chetumal. Permission must be obtained to dive at the site and if you get it you'll be rewarded by seeing some of the most notorious coral in the Western Hemisphere. The only living quarters in the reserve is a Mexican Navy post and 15 cabins/huts (on one caye) used by fishermen during lobster season. Established in 1996, the 38,600-sq-mile (100,000-sq-km) nature reserve has coral reefs, mangroves and sea grass beds, plus some of the best fishing in the country. The reserve is threatened by tourism, poaching and over-fishing. There are 116 bird species recorded, some of which are endangered.

The atoll is 28 miles (45 km) long by 10 miles (15 km) wide and includes four small cayes. The 20 ships rusting and forming a base for coral to anchor upon are on the east side of the atoll and thus subject to strong currents. Bad weather too can cancel a trip for days. All dive centers with permission to go to the atoll offer full-day, three-tank dives (to make it worthwhile) and the cost is about $160-$175 per person or $100 for snorkelers, including lunch. This is expensive but getting to the atoll is almost a two-hour boat trip. The agent specializing in tours to the atoll is **XTC Tours** in Xcalak, www.xtcdivecenter.com.



*Chinchorro red coral*

## Nightlife

Nightlife in Chetumal is non-existent, except for the bars along Av Heroes.

# Shopping

Walk along Av Niños Heroes from the municipal pier west. It's one long shopping stretch interspersed with hotels, restaurants and bars where everything is less than half of what you'd pay in Playa, Cancún or Isla Mujeres.

*Av Niños Heroes (www.delange.org)*

**Plaza de Americas Mall** not only has huge supermarkets and chain department stores but also a modern movie theater.

# Hotels

**Chetumal Hostel**, Sicilia #262 & San Salvador, $, is a family-run affair with dorms and private rooms close to the bus station. Internet, fans and kitchen facilities are available and there is no curfew.

| HOTEL PRICE CHART | |
|---|---|
| Cost per night for two before tax | |
| $ | Under $50 |
| $$ | $51-$100 |
| $$$ | $101-$175 |
| $$$$ | $176-$250 |
| $$$$$ | Over $250 |

**Noor Hotel**, José Maria Morelos #301 and the Malacón, $$, is a clean, inexpensive place with 35 small rooms and friendly owners. Some rooms have balconies and there is a tiny pool. There is no phone provided – they prefer to be booked through hotel booking services. I recommend popping in and taking a chance that they will have a clean room.

*Noor Hotel bedroom*

**Los Cocos Hotel**, Av Heroes, #134 and Chapultepec, ☎ 835-0430, $$, is a white stucco building with groomed gardens, and a restaurant, bar and pool. Recommended. This is competition for the Holiday Inn across the way.

*Holiday Inn*

**Casa Blanca**, Av Alvaro Obregon #312, ☎ 832-1658, www.casablanca-chetumal.com, $$, has 60 small rooms and is moderately clean.

**Holiday Inn**, Av Heroes # 171, ☎ 835-0400, $$$, has English-speaking staff at reception. There is a pool, restaurant and about 85 comfortable rooms on three floors.

## Restaurants

**Express Café**, Calle 22 de Inero and the Malacón, ☎ 833-3013, is best for a lunch of tacos or a sandwich, which will cost under $4.

**El Fenicio**, #74 Av de los Heroes and Zaragoza, is open 24 hours. It is always packed (a good recommendation) and you can get breakfast all day for less than $5.

**Pantoja**, #81 Mahatma Gandhi and 16 de Septiembre, is close to the market and super for breakfast – a large platter of fruit and an omelette. With coffee on the side, the price is less than $5. But also try them for dinner. Their prices are exceptional and their food is too.

**Plaza de los Americas**, Av Insurgentes and Av Quintana Roo, has numerous shops and restaurants but it's a long way from the Center.



# Laguna de Bacalar

The lagoon, the second-largest in Mexico, is known as the seven-color lake. Its name is from the Maya word *Halal*, meaning "place surrounded by reeds." Like a long finger, the lake is 26 miles (42 km) long and 1.2 miles (two km) wide. It invites swimming, windsurfing, and a range of other activities.

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- **What to See & Do** 272
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The water of the lagoon is clear, the calcium-carbonate silt on the bottom is recommended for a self-spa treatment and the surrounding mangroves host thousands of birds. The area is not recommended for the cruise crowd.

# Getting Here & Around

To reach the lagoon and the village of Bacalar, drive south on Highway 307 past Tulum, gas up at Filipe Carillo Puerto and continue through the Sian Ka'an Bio Reserve to Bacalar. If driving from Chetumal, follow Highway 307 north for 22 miles (35 km). Once you've followed the signs and left the main road, you will come to a Catholic Church. Continue past it for one more block and turn left to reach the Plaza. Just beyond the Plaza is the fort.

If traveling by **bus**, from Chetumal take the bus to Majahual. It leaves at 5 and 8:30 am or 2:30 and 8 pm daily. Get off at Bacalar. Cost is $2 per person.

Traveling from the north, take the bus toward Chetumal from Majahual. These buses depart Majahual at 7:30 and 10:30 am or 1, 3:30 and 7:30 pm, at a cost of $4.90 per person. There are no buses leaving Majahual on Sundays at 7:30 am.

Once in Bacalar, walking is easy and best, although there are a few public buses going from one end to the other. Around the Plaza is the best place to find them.

# What to See & Do

**Festival of San Joaquin de Bacalar**, the first two weeks of August, is an annual fiesta featuring outdoor concerts, dance competitions, horse races, games and a bit of boozing thrown in for spice.

On the shore near the center is **Fort San Felipe** and **Museum**, open Tuesday-Friday, 10-2 and 4-7 pm or weekends from 10 am-6 pm. Entrance is $5/adults, $3/children. It is in the center of the town, across from the Plaza but still on the shore of the lagoon. The museum signs are both in

*Fort San Felipe*

English and Spanish. The well maintained, walled fort was first built by Gaspar Pacheco in 1545 but by 1642 it had been destroyed by pirates and illegal logwood dealers exporting the precious commodity once used in dyes. The fort was rebuilt in 1729 using local stones, some of which came from Maya ruins. Its purpose was to protect the Mexicans from attacks by pirates and displaced Indians. At that time it was rebuilt under the direction of field marshal Antonio de Figueroa y Silva and was shaped like a star with a huge moat. During the Caste War the fort became a Maya stronghold but was again destroyed. Finally, in 1902, it was again rebuilt and eventually made into a tourist attraction and museum. If you look carefully you can still see bullet marks from past conflicts.

**Kohunlich Ruins**, open 8 am-5 pm daily, $3 entry fee, are 1.8 miles (three km) from Bacalar along Highway 186 and a pleasant 20-minute walk. The ruins are noted for their stucco masks on a pyramid built about 500 AD. The ruins are surrounded by jungle that is seething with wildlife. There are three partially excavated pyramids and a small cenote. The main palace is surrounded by Cahoon palms and the residential area is beyond (above) the Plaza, with a good view of the surrounding landscape.

*Kohunlich Ruins*

**Cenote Azul**, near the town entrance, is 300 feet (100 m) deep, reputed to be the largest and cleanest in the Yucatán. Follow signs to get there. It is popular for swimming, snorkeling and some diving. There is a restaurant on the rim where you can enjoy a beer and watch the action in the water.

Quintana Roo is lush jungle so bird and animal life thrives. **Walking** in the Bacalar region, you could easily see up to **150 bird species** without even trying. If you are a real birder take the walk from the Rancho Encantado (see page 274) north to the reserve about 1.8 miles (three km) into the jungle.

## Tour Operators

**Mis Casas**, north end of Laguna Bacalar (turn at Km 59 off Highway 307) ☎ 834-2126 or 834-2035, www.krunning.com. This company offers three-hour jungle-river trips for $25 per person. If you've never done a jungle river trip, this one is highly recommended. You may well see exotic

birds such as turkey vultures and egrets or animals such as tejones, turtles or crocs hiding in the thick vegetation along the shore. This company also offers an early 2½-hour guided birding tour at 6:30 am (book the night before). The cost is $12.50 and includes your breakfast. Their identification knowledge is close to encyclopedic.

# Nightlife

This is as you make it – mostly sipping a beer at your hotel, or listening to the cicadas grind away on their violins.

# Hotels

**Laguna Maya Resort**, ☎ 481-7260, $$/$$$, www.laguna-debacalar.com, is on Laguna Bacalar. The resort has one- and two-bedroom thatch-roof cabins, each with a private bathroom. The cabins are clean and comfortable and the reserve is a heaven for wildlife. The resort can accommodate a total of 18 guests. Dinner would be extra or you can bring goodies to sustain you. Robert and Greta will also make arrangements for a tour of the reserve or lagoon. Their website is excellent, especially their photos of birds spotted near the resort. Just beyond the lagoon is the Cenote Azul.

| HOTEL PRICE CHART | |
|---|---|
| Cost per night for two before tax | |
| $ | Under $50 |
| $$ | $51-$100 |
| $$$ | $101-$175 |
| $$$$ | $176-$250 |
| $$$$$ | Over $250 |

*View froom the Laguna Maya Resort*

Also at the lagoon is **Rancho Encantado**, ☎ 894-7074, $$$$$, www.encantado.com/resort.html. They have 12 mahogany and cedar palm-thatched cabins with tiled bathrooms, kitchenettes and porches opening onto the garden trilling with birdlife. Besides the cabins there is a

*Dock at Rancho Encantado*

house for rent. A casita for all-inclusive gourmet meals is off to the side but still within view of the lagoon and another casita is reserved for retreat groups. The spa, with a resident therapist and a Jacuzzi, is recommended.

**Mis Casas**, ☎ 834-2126 or 834-2035, www.krunning.com, $$$, is 20 miles (30 km) north of the town. Turn off Highway 307 at Km 59 toward the lake. Mis Casas has numerous accommodations with kitchens, some with two bedrooms, and some bachelor units with private balconies. All guests have use of the games/reading room, dock and boathouse, rafts made from recycled pop cans and two canoes. Electricity is generated by solar panels. On their website they say that "mis" is cat in Maya and casa is "house" in Spanish. Does this translate to a cathouse in English?

## MAJAHUAL

*Hotel Balamku*

The cruise ship port was decimated during Hurricane Dean in August 2007 and it may still not have reopened by the time you read this. Most business were destroyed and the town was basically flattened. However, if you are down there, the **Balamku**, 3½ miles (5.7 km) south of the beach road, ☎ 839-5332, www.balamku.com, $$, has eight beachfront rooms with queen-sized beds. The rooms are in circular huts with thatch roofs. Included in the price is breakfast, use of kayaks, secured parking and night-time security guards. **Hotel Maya Luna**, 3.2 miles (5.2 km) south of town, ☎ 836-0905, www.hotelmayaluna.com, $$, has beachfront studios and two apartments, one with two bedrooms, the other with one. **Hotel Arrecifes**, Km 2.6 south of town, ☎ 831-6048, $$, has 10 comfortable rooms with balconies, two overlooking the ocean. **Margarita del Sol**, 4.2 miles (seven km) south of town, www.margaritadelsol.com, has rooms with kitchens (see website for details).

# Restaurant

**Cenote Azul Restaurant**, Costero #610, ☎ 834-2460, open 11 am to 7 pm daily, is the most popular place to eat in town. The shrimp dishes are the best.

# Xcalak

This is the southernmost town in Mexico, just five miles (10 km) by water from the Belize border. To get here, take a **bus** from Chetumal or Cancún to Felipe Carrillo Puerto and transfer to one headed for Limones (no hotel at Limones). From Limones, you can catch a bus to Xcalak. If you can get to Majahual, buses leave for Xcalak at 6 am and 4 pm. Buses leave Xcalak every day at 5 am and 2 pm.

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- **Dive Sites** 277


A **taxi** would cost about $125 from Cancún and $50 from Chetumal.

Note that all distances in Xcalak are measured from the bridge at the north end of the village.

Because of its proximity to the British-governed country of Belize, quite a bit of English is spoken here. Xcalak is a sleepy little fishing village where you can kick back, fly-fish, explore the mangroves of Bacalar Chico or deep-sea dive. If those aren't your things, you may want to push out on a kayak. Nightlife is dark. Day life is *suave y traquilo*. How about just hanging out between the bar and beach?

## Where to Stay

There are four accommodations available that survived Hurricane Dean. **Casa Carolina**, www.casacarolina.net, $$, has four beachfront rooms. They have kitchenettes and are considered the best in town. **Costa de Cocos**, www.costadecocos.com, $$$, has beachfront cabins with fans, breakfast and dinner included. They offer fly-fishing packages and have been recommended by numerous fishing magazines. And **Sin Duda Villas**, www.sindudavillas.com,

*Hotel Tierra Maya*

$$$, is even more secluded as they are 15 minutes north of town. However, their villas are beautiful and, if rest is what you want, try them. **Hotel Tierra Maya**, 1.2 miles (two km) north of the bridge, $$$, www.tierramaya.net, has beachfront suites and rooms that are clean and brightly decorated, with fans. They provide drinking water, ocean kayaks and bicycles. Bring your own snorkel gear (they do not provide this). They specialize in tour services (including a trip to Ambergris Caye in Belize).

Because of erratic service phone numbers are not included for Xcalak.

# Dive Sites

There are numerous sites that run both north and south of Xcalak, some that have not been damaged by Hurricane Dean. **Banko Chinchorro** is 20 miles (30 km) from shore and is the main reason divers hang out here. But there is much more. I have listed just a few.

*Angelfish*

**Hob Na** is a wide canyon flowing toward deeper water. This dive is 40 ft at the top of the canyon and drops to 110 ft (34 m) at the bottom. It harbors nesting sites of huge groupers.

**Santa Julia** has tongue and groove formations that drop to about 80 ft (25 m) and house giant groopers in among the large sponges. There are also spadefish and snappers.

*Clownfish*

**Doña Nica**, north of Xpalak is a favorite for night dives and has lots of octopi and lobster.

**Alejandro's** is horseshoe-shaped, 40-60 ft (12-18 m) deep with large coral heads and moray eels.

**La Poza** is 30-80 ft (10-25 m) deep and the only one of its kind in the Western World. It is a box canyon that runs parallel to the shore and gets wider and deeper the farther it goes. One wall of the canyon is coral (some of it the endangered black coral) and the land-side wall is sand. There is a strong current here. Tarpon, snapper, jacks, morays and parrotfish are common, and some are exceptionally large.

Yucatán
Gulf of Mexico
Telchac Puerto
Dzilam de Bravo
Santa Clara
Chabihau
Rio Lagartos
Las Coloradas
San Felipe
El Cuyo
SAN FELIPE NATURAL PARK
RIO LAGARTOS NATURAL PARK
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Progreso
Chelem
Dzibilchaltun
Museo Maya
Yobain
Sisal
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Baca
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176
Colonia Yucatán
25
Motul
Tizimin
Dzitya
Kancabchen
DEL FLAMINGO NATURAL PARK
MERIDA
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Izamal
Teya
Ek Balam
Celestun
Uman
Kanasin
180
Kantunil
to Cancún
Acanceh
Yaxcopoil
Tecoh
Piste
Balancanchen
Xcan
Mayapan
Telchaquillo
Chichén Itzá
Valladolid
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Tekit
Oxkintok
Mani
Chumayel
Muna
Teabo
Uxmal
Ticul
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Santa Elena
Labna
Oxcutzcab
to Tulum
CAMPECHE
Kabah
Loltun
Ichmul
Xlapak
Peto
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Sayil
Calotmul
261
Kiuic
Chacmultun
281
QUINTANA ROO
Becanchen
to Chetumal
to Campeche
to Felipe Carillo Puerto
N
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NOT TO SCALE
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# Mérida

Mérida, called La Ciudad Blanca, the White City, is the capital of the Yucatán and the cultural center of the state. Built over the ancient Maya city of T'Ho, Merida's light-colored façades crowning its colonial architecture are dazzling. Since the state's major university campuses are located here, an atmosphere of youthfulness and artistic culture pervades the city.

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## History

The Maya city of Ichcaanziho was captured by the conquistadores in the mid-1500s. First the Spaniards came for the peaceful isolated life as cattle ranchers but by the 1800s they discovered henequen, a.k.a. green gold. Henequen, taken from the agave cactus, is grown abundantly in the area and was used for making rope. By 1927 there were 658 haciendas growing and processing henequen.

The richest of the families was that of Francisco del Mozo whose home was built along Paseo de Montejo. He so loved the city, because it reminded him of his home in Spain, that he renamed it Mérida. His house eventually became a city bank. However, six months after the city was baptized in 1542 with its modern name, 60,000 Maya attacked, protesting the exploitation of them and their land. Their defeat was the beginning of the end of the Maya era.

Henequen was used for making rope of every size, from a delicate cord for hanging a hammock to a thick cable for tying ships to the docks. The advent of synthetic fibers during World War II brought the henequen market to its knees, however, and rich finca owners abandoned their estates, leaving them to encroaching jungles.

Hacienda architecture was fairly standard. The buildings were large stone structures with peaked roofs that allowed good air circulation and protection from the intense heat of summer. All houses had a central patio, chapel, company store, machine room and jail. Most also had a waterwheel, vegetable garden and fiber racks.

# Getting Here & Around

If driving out of town, 65 east becomes Route 180 and leads to Chichén Itzá and Cancún. Paseo Montejo north becomes Route 261 going to Progreso and Dzibilchaltun. To go to Celestún, follow route 180 south to Umán (10½ miles/17 km from Mérida center) and then take Route 281 west. To go to Uxmal, follow directions to Umán and then follow Route 261 south and Route 180 south to Campeche. The highways are well marked except for the circle in Umán, but ask locals for directions and you'll be fine.

**DISTANCES FROM MÉRIDA**

| | |
|---|---|
| Campeche | 157 miles/253 km |
| Cancún | 142 miles/230 km |
| Celestun | 58 miles/93 km |
| Chetumal | 283 miles/456 km |
| Chichén Itza | 74 miles/120 km |
| Dzibilchaltun | 14 miles/23 km |
| Ek'Balam | 114 miles/184 km |
| Izamal | 51 miles/72 km |
| Kabáh | 63 miles/102 km |
| Labna | 73 miles/118 km |
| Loltun | 70 miles/113 km |
| Mayapan | 30 miles/49 km |
| Mexico City | 961 miles/1,550 km |
| Playa del Carmen | 241 miles/389 km |
| Progreso | 22 miles/36 km |
| Rio Lagartos | 136 miles/219 km |
| Sayil | 78 miles/126 km |
| Sisal | 33 miles/53 km |
| Telchac | 38 miles/62 km |
| Ticul | 52 miles/84 km |
| Tizimin | 42 miles/67 km |
| Tulum | 295 miles/476 km |

| | |
|---|---|
| Uman | 11 miles/17 km |
| Uxmal | 52 miles/80 km |
| Valladolid | 104 miles/160 km |
| Xlapak | 75 miles/121 km |

The **bus station on Calle 69** between Calles 68 and 70, ☎ 923-2287 or 923-4440 (no English website), offers 2nd-class service (fairly plush to me) to Calkini, Campeche, Ciudad Del Carmen, Champotón, Escarcéga, Villahermosa, Umán, Halacho, Pomuch, Izamal, Valladolid, Tizimin, Cobá, Tulum, Muna, Ticul, Oxkutzcab, Tekax, Peto, Carrillo Puerto, Cancún, Becal, Playa de Catazaha, Hecelchakán, Chichin Itzá, Playa del Carmen, Palenque, Ocosingo, San Cristobal, Tuxtla Gtz, Acayucan, Puebla, and Mexico City.

The **bus station on Calle 50** between Calle 65 and 67, ☎ 924-7868 or 924-8055, offers 2nd-class service to Celestún, Cancún, Izamal, Seye, Sotuta, Hoctun, Yaxcaba, San Cristobal, Acanceh, Cantamayec, Cuzama, Chapab, Cholul, Chumayel, Eknakan, Homun, Mayapan, Tepich, Teabo, Ticul, Mana, Mani, Huhi, Tekit, Oxkutzcab, Baca, Calotmul, Canshacab, Chicxulub Puerto, Colonia Yucatán, Conkal, Buctzotz, Dzemul, El Cuyo, Dzidzantún, Las Colorados, Ria Lagartos, Telchac, Chiquila, Holbox.

**Hotel Fiesta America**, Calle 60 and Colon, ☎ 925-0910, www.uno.com.mx, offers 1st class service to Cancún. Buses leave at 7:15, 7:45 am or 2:15, 4:15 and 9:15 pm daily.

**Progreso Bus Terminal**, Calle 62 between Calle 65 and 67, ☎ 928-3965, offers the only service to Progreso.

**Taxis**, ☎ 928-3030 or 923-1317, are abundant and cost $12 per hour or $25 to Progreso, $10 to the golf club or airport and $4 to the bus station from the center of town. Agree on the price before hiring the car.

## Airport

Located at Km 14.5 on the road to Umán, ☎ 946-1530. The airport serves seven airlines:

**Aeromexico**, ☎ 920-1260, www.aeromexico.com

**Aerocalifornia**, ☎ 800-080-9090, www.aerocalifornia.com.mx

**Aviacsa**, ☎ 800-284-2272, www.aviacsa.com

**Mexicana**, ☎ 944-9105, www.mexicana.com

**Continental**, ☎ 926-3100, www.continental.com

**Delta**, ☎ 800-123-4710, www.delta.com

Transportation to the city is by taxi and the cost is about $10-$15, depending on where in the city you are going.

# Orientation

Mérida has the Plaza Grande in its center and streets radiating out from it. The Grand Prada, where outdoor restaurants set up tables and entertainment, runs along the Plaza's north side. Even-numbered streets run north and south with the numbers rising from the east. In other words Calle 46, that runs north and south is farther east than Calle 70. The odd-numbered streets run east and west, with the numbers decreasing as one travels north. Calle 69 is farther south than Calle 47.

Downtown hotels surround the streets just off the Plaza along 60, 61, 62 and 63 and some of the less expensive ones are located along the streets between the bus stations and the center.

## Useful Telephone Numbers

**Tourist Board**, ☎ 930-3760, www.mayayucatan.com

**Tourist Police**, ☎ 930-3200, ext. 40062

**Green Angels**, ☎ 983-1184

## Medical

**Centro Medico de las Americas**, #365 Calle 54 and Perez Ponce, ☎ 927-3199 is a first-rate hospital with specialists in all fields.

**Clinica Mérida**, #242 Calle 32, Colonia Garcia Jineres, ☎ 925-4508 or 925-4308

## Consulates

For a list of all embassies and consulates in Mexico go to www.embassiesabroad.com/embassies-in/Mexico. Those in Mérida are:

**Austria**, #309 Av Colon and 60, ☎ 925-6386

**Belize**, #498 Calle 53 and 58, ☎ 928-6152

**Cuba**, #320 I-D, Calle 42 and Colonia Campestre, ☎ 944-4215

**United States**, #338-K Calle 60 between 29 and 31, ☎ 925-5011

**France**, #528 Calle 33D between 62A and 72, ☎ 925-2886

**Holland**, #418 Calle 64 between 47 and 29, ☎ 924-3122



*Facing page: Door of Cathedral of San Ildelfonso, Mérida* (White_tiger2/Dreamstime.com)

## Festivals

**Bird Festival**, www.yucatantoday.com/events/eng-bird-festival.htm, is held in mid-November for four days. The cost is $20 per person and for that you receive a cap, t-shirt and bird list. You will also receive lunch at the closing ceremony. There are workshops, conferences, and photograph and drawing displays. They also conduct guided birding trips to archeological sites, haciendas and biospheres. The big event is the 28-hour bird-a-thon, where teams compete in bird identification and counting. For this there are numerous prizes.

Workshops conducted include topics such as Coastline Birds of North Coast Yucatán, Introduction to Birds, and Bird Watching. Some workshops are not included in the price of the conference. Prominent guest speakers are also involved each year. If you're a birder, this is a must.

**National Arts Festival**, sponsored by the National Board of Culture, the Institute of Fine Arts and the city and state, is held for 17 days each January and attracts over 1,000 artists from around the world. There are 170 events in venues throughout the city. These include live concerts, opera, dance, theater performances, art and photography exhibitions. Tickets can be purchased at the Tourist Office.

# What to See & Do

**Walking Tours:** Meet at the information office at City Hall, Calle 62 between 61 and 63, at 9:30 am for a guided walking tour of the historical center. There is no charge. The **House and Garden Tours** are conducted by the Mérida English Library every Wednesday and start from the library at 9:45 am. They visit three different historical houses and end at Casa Catherwood in Santiago Park. The cost for this is $20 per person. You can also walk along Paseo Montejo from the circle at Calle 47 to Av Colon and view the contemporary sculptures along the way. Some mix Maya and Colonial styles while one unique piece is a woodcarving on a tree trunk. The big attraction is the house between Calle 33-35, the Casa Montes Molina, also a museum.

# The Zocalo

Also called the Plaza Grande, the Zocalo is bordered by Calles 60, 61, 62 and 63.

The **Cathedral of San Ildefonso**, Calle 60 (on the Zocalo), the oldest inland church in North America, is an imposing stone structure with twin towers designed in Renaissance style. Completed in 1598, its architect was Juan Miguel de Aguerro, who also designed Fort Morro Castle in Havana. The original architectural drawings were destined for Peru but they got re-routed and ended up here. The building is far bigger than the original plans dictated. The first Mexican coat of arms crowns the main entrance. The cathedral sits directly over the pyramid of the T'ho civilization and many of the stones were recycled from the ancient city.

*Cathedral of San Ildefonso*
*(JosephBarillari)*

Inside, the church is rather unadorned. During the 1915 revolution the church was sacked and burned, the art and gold stolen. A replica of the Cristo de las Ampollas (Christ of the Blisters) sits in a shrine along the side. The original was burned, thus disproving the myth that it couldn't burn. The icon is carried through the streets during a festival that occurs in late September to mid-October.

Mérida is the cultural center of the Yucatán and the city is inundated with art galleries and exhibitions. Visit the tourist office, ☎ 942-0000 for information on the latest shows.

**Macay Museum**, (Museum of Contemporary Art) #487 Calle 50 between 57 and 59, ☎ 928-3258, open Tuesday to Saturday, 9 am-6:30 pm and Sunday, 9 am-2 pm, admission $3 (Sunday free). It features both permanent and rotating exhibitions. Guided tours are available. The rotating art display shows traditional clothing, jewelry, pottery, ceramics and masks. The embroidery pieces are exceptional. The main exhibits are by Fernando Castro Pacheco, the same painter who did the work in the Government House. The museum also brings in temporary exhibitions from

around the globe. The most noted is the yearly Sisterhood in Sculpture. It had an ecological theme in 2008, which resulted in some pretty wild pieces, with my favorite being a moose made of oil barrels. The building was constructed as the city armory in the mid-1500s. The entrance, along the pedestrian walkway, displays a contemporary peice of sculpture, which changes every few months.

*Government House (Dieter Mueller)*

**Government House**, northeast corner of the Zocalo, is open daily from 8 am to 5 pm, no admission charge. It was first built in 1735, then rebuilt in 1898 (the third in this spot) and decorated with 25 murals hand-painted and designed by Fernando Castro Pacheco between 1971 and 1979. They depict historical events from Maya days through to the conquistador reign with works covering up to 430 square feet. Pacheco has a distinctive style and has often been imitated but never equaled.

The murals along the staircase portray the scenes described in the Popal Vuh that show the struggle in the heart of the Indian. Upstairs in the Hall of History, are interpretations of the Caste War, of Fray Landa's burning Maya books, of Maya being sold into slavery and of the British ransacking the Caribbean coast down to and including Belize.

*Inside the Government House*

# Mérida

SIGHTS

1. Zocalo/Plaza Grande
2. Catedral de San Ildefonso
3. Contemporary Art Museum
4. Casa de Montejo
5. Palacio Municpal
6. Palacio de Gobierno
7. Parque Hidalgo/Parque de la Madre
8. Teatro Péon Contreras & Tourist Information
9. University of Yucatán
10. Parque Santa Lucia
11. Parque Santa Ana
12. Parque de Mejorada
13. Macay Museum (Contemporary Art)
14. Arco del Puente
15. Arco de Dragones
16. Mercado Municipal
17. City Museum
18. Crafts Market
19. Parque de San Juan
20. Arco de San Juan
21. Pinacoteca Art Museum
22. Music Museum

SERVICES

23. Turitransmerida
24. Viajes y Ecoturismo
25. Easyway Rent-a-Car
26. Mexico Rent-a-Car

PLACES TO STAY

27. Hotel San Juan
28. Hotel Mucuy
29. Hotel Los Arcos
30. Hotel El Español
31. Hotel Reforma
32. Hostel Zocalo
33. Hotel Flamingo
34. Hotel Oviedo
35. Hotel Posada Toledo
36. Hotel Santa Luica
37. Casa Esperanza
38. Gran Hotel/Hotel Carube
39. Hotel Colonial
40. Hotel Lord de Mérida

N

NOT TO SCALE

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Mexican artist Fernando Castro Pacheco was born in Mérida in 1918 and at age 15 entered the Mérida School of Fine Art where he studied under Alfonso Cardone for six years. He moved to Mexico City, married and fathered two children before joining the Taller de Grafica Popular, an organization associated with popular political movements and protest art. By the 1950s, he was internationally known. Often his main focus is that of a lone female figure, either with or without clothes. Pacheco returned to Mérida in 1970, where he still resides.

The **Planetarium**, Calle 62 and 61 at the Olympus Cultural Center, has shows at 10 am, noon, 5 and 7 pm, Tuesday to Saturday. Admission is $3 for adults and $1.50 for children. No admittance allowed after the shows begin. The planetarium holds just 78 people, who can gaze at the celestial presentations; they change twice a year. A gift shop and restaurant are located on site, as is a multi-roomed art exhibition area. No admission charge for the art exhibitions. Next door to the Cultural Center is **City Hall**, identifiable by the clock tower.

*Casa de Montejo entrance*

**Casa de Montejo**, south side of the Zocalo on Calle 63, is considered the finest example of 16th-century architecture – a combination of Moorish, Gothic and Renaissance styles. As an added decorative feature, some of the stones used in the building came from the Maya ruin of T'ho. Montejo was called back to Spain and charged with atrocities toward the Maya by the Spanish government just two years after the house was completed. He remained in Spain but his family continued to live in the house and rule the Yucatán for almost 300 years more. The house was renovated in the 1980s and made into a bank. You can visit during banking hours, 9 am-5 pm weekdays.

*Casa Montes Molina (Mayoyo)*

**Casa Montes Molina**, Paseo Montejo between 33 and 35, is open Monday-Friday, 9 am to 5 pm and Saturday, 9 am to 1 pm, $4 entry fee, www.laquintamm.com. The building was constructed by the Montejo family, henequen barons, in 1902. The building has been renovated and furnished with period pieces. Although it appears locked, open the door and enter the garden. You will be shown where to go after you pay your entry fee.

**City Museum**, Calle 65 and 56 (the old post office building), ☎ 923-6869, open Tuesday to Friday, 10 am-2 pm and 4-8 pm, no admission. On display are items of interest to the history of the city, including some ancient maps. You will learn about the pre-conquest settlement of T'ho and see a reconstructed burial site. The recently restored building is one of the most attractive in the city. It has coral-pink paint, crystal chandeliers and coral-colored floor tiles.

**Railway Museum**, Calle 43 between 48 and 50, is an open-air museum with about 50 old cars – some very elegant – from the days of high-use railways. However, keeping documents and artifacts in the open is not a good idea, so most of these items can be found in the **Pinacoteca Art Museum**, Calle 59 between 58 and 60, open Tuesday to Saturday, 8 am to 4 pm and Sunday from 8 am to 2 pm, admission $1. Besides items related to the railway, the Pinacoteca houses numerous colonial paintings and sculptures.

**Museum of Anthropology and History**, Palacio Canton, Paseo de Montejo and Calle 43, open Tuesday to Saturday, 9 am to 8 pm and Sunday from 8 am to 2 pm. Admission is $4 per person. Admiring the architecture of the Canton Palace, once the governors' residence, is worth the trip to the museum. The building was designed by Italian architect Enrico Deserti in the early 1900s and is an indication of the opulence of the high henequen period. The many Maya and early conquistador exhibits are a bonus. The visit does not take more than two hours, but walking the Paseo de Montejo to Calle 60 past some of the other imposing colonial

*Museum of Anthropology and History*

homes that make the street a museum in itself could take the rest of the day. Montejo was designed after the Champs-Elysées in Paris.

**Pinacoteca Art Museum**, Calle 59 between 58 and 60, open Tuesday to Saturday, 8 am to 4 pm and Sunday from 8 am to 2 pm, admission $1. This is a permanent exhibition featuring paintings and sculpture from colonial times. They also display documents and artifacts from the railway lines that can't be housed where the cars are displayed because there is no building there.

**Yucatecan Music Museum**, #464-A Calle 57 between 48 and 50, near the Plaza Mejorada, ☎ 923-7224, open Tuesday to Saturday, 9 am-8 pm, $2 entry fee. For music lovers this museum has a fine display of instruments, music paraphernalia, and Afro-Cuban instruments. It also tells the history of Yucatán music and its effects on the world. The signage is in Spanish so bring a dictionary. The museum is housed in a stunning colonial building that is surrounded by a courtyard in which concerts are often held.

Henequen plantations were usually administered by overseers who provided necessary food and lodging (and moral direction) in exchange for slave labor. The workers, (Mexican, Chinese, Korean and Yaqui Indian) tended the endless fields of agave cactus, harvested the eight-foot-long leaves, transported them to fiber stripping machines on the property, and finally placed them on drying racks in the sun.

**Teatro José Peon Contreras**, Calle 60 and 57, has live performances all year that include plays, operas, symphony and ballet. During tourist season they also offer Folklorico ($25 per person), which features traditional dance and music from around the country. For information on events visit

the tourist office on the Plaza. This beautiful opera house was named after the famous doctor and poet born in Mérida in 1843. This exquisite neo-classic building, is an example of the "Parisian" look the henequen developers took on for sophistication in the 19th century.

**Casa Catherwood**, #572 Calle 59 and 72, open daily from 8 am-2 pm and 5-9 pm, admission $5 for the upstairs lithograph exhibition (free downstairs), www.casa-catherwood.com. As the name implies, the upper rooms are dedicated to Catherwood's lithographs that were used in his books about his travels to the Yucatán when he explored and described Maya ruins. Reproductions of Catherwood's lithographs can be purchased. Besides the lithographs, the museum often has temporary exhibitions. Posters and reproductions of these items can also be purchased. One of Catherwood's lithographs, showing a bas relief from Palenque, is at right.

Every Sunday afternoon, in the historical center, motorized vehicles are banned. Street vendors offer local crafts and foods, sidewalk cafés fill with relaxed "people watchers" and buskers, dancers and musicians entertain until late in the evening. Locals and tourists congregate, mingle and enjoy.

## Parks & Links

**Golf Club of the Yucatán**, Km 14.5, Highway 261 (to Progreso), ☎ 922-0071, is an 18-hole, par-72, 6,590-yard course with a practice green and driving range. Open 6 am to 9 pm Tuesday to Saturday and 6 am to 5 pm Sundays. The club features a pool, gym, five tennis courts, a steam bath, a children's play area, a bar, gardens and a conference room.

**Hidalgo Park**, Calle 60, is across from Hotel Caribe and a block north of the Zocalo. The church here, built by the Jesuits in 1618, has an ornate wooden altar decorated with gold leaf and is a favorite for upper-class

weddings. Every stone in the church came from the local Maya temples. Along the walls on Calle 59, Maya carvings can still be detected. The church was taken over by the Franciscans when the Jesuits were banished from the Americas in 1767. It was then called the Church of the Third Order. The trees shading the park are mainly almond trees. On Sundays the park becomes an outdoor handicraft market.

**Parque de la Madre**, Calle 59 and 60, on the opposite side of the church from Hidalgo Park, has a replicated marble statue of the Madonna and Child by Alexandre Lenoir. The original is in Paris.

**Santa Lucia Park**, Calle 60 between 53 and 55, was once a stagecoach stop and the center of the slave market. Folk dancing and orchestral music is performed here every Thursday evening and a handicraft market takes place every Sunday. The church on the park was built in 1575 for blacks and mulattos.

**La Mejorada Church**, Calle 59 and 50, is flanked by the **Nun's Convent**. The churchyard is a park. The church and convent were built in 1621 and abandoned when the Franciscans were banished from Mexico in 1861. The church and convent were then used as an army barracks and finally as an architectural school run by the University of the Yucatán. Just south of the park is the **Arco de los Dragones**, Calle 61 between 50 and 52, which was one of 11 passages (one of two remaining) into and out of Mérida when it was a walled city. This gateway was also once the entryway to the army barracks that was previously La Mejorada Church (see above).

**Monument to the Nation**, Paseo Montejo, is a large stone circular monument with a Maya statue holding the Mexican flag. Designed by Colombian sculptor, Romulo Rozo Krauss, it was started in 1945 and took 11 years to complete. Across the street is a bakery (across from McDonald's) with delicious baked goods.

## Art

*Samples of Katrin Schikora's work*

**Cholul** is a village of about 5,000 people located on Highway 176 just northeast of Merida's city center and five miles (9½ km) before (south of) the ruin of Dzibichaltun. It can be reached by a local bus. The village is rapidly becoming the artistic center of the Yucatán, with numerous ceramic artists building homes and studios here. The most notable is Katrin Schikora, #96 Calle 24

between 15th and Laureles, %% 921-5127, www.katrin-schikora.com, who has received numerous prestigious commissions, and has won as many prizes. She has also displayed her work internationally. If you want something different and of high quality, her ceramics may be what you need.

*San Pedro in Cholul*

In addition to artists' studios, there is also the San Pedro colonial church here, with murals from the 1600s that have been totally restored, a traditional market and a colonial-styled Plaza.

## Nature

**Cuxtal Ecological Reserve** is 21,500 acres of commissaries, towns, and haciendas, located 20 miles (32 km) south of Mérida. It takes about three hours to tour it if you have a car. If going by public transportation, not all the sites can be visited. In June 1993, the government made this area a reserve to protect the history of the seven large haciendas and related Maya villages. There are also about 12 minor archeological sites, six cenotes and Merida's water treatment plant. The enormous forested areas, lush with local flora, house numerous native animals such as deer and armadillos. The bird life too is remarkable.

The best time to go is on Sunday. To get there by car, take Calle 50 or Calle 42 and follow the signs. You shouldn't miss the **Dzoyaxche Hacienda** where you can ride in a horse-drawn truck, ride a horse, camp, swim in a cenote and hike. The house and chapel were built in 1926.

*Hunucmá Cathedral*

The village of **Hunucmá** is at the crossroads of Highway 178 (a secondary road from Mérida) and High-

way 281, the main road between Mérida and Celestún. There is a lovely 16th-century cathedral, built mainly of stones from Maya ruins, the remains of a railway station that linked the henequen industry in the region with the port and an active market where snacks and drinks can be purchased.

**Sihunchen**, a hacienda near Hunucmá, ☎ 925-8199, offers guided bird-watching tours along the 2½-three miles (four-five km) of jungle trails on the property. The cost is $5 for park fees and between $60 and $80 (for up to eight people) for an English-speaking guide. You must let them know 24 hours in advance of your arrival. The cost of a taxi from Hunucmà is about $10. Best times are from 5:30 am to 9:30 and 7:30 pm until dark, but mornings are best. For $10 you can enjoy a traditional Maya breakfast of frijoles, tortillas, chaya (spinach), and huevos (eggs) after your tour. Larger groups have the option of observing cultural dancing events.

## The Ruins

*Temple of the Seven Dolls, Dzibilchaltun*
*(David R. Wohl)*

The world famous **Dzibilchaltun Ruins,** 10 miles (15 km) north of Mérida, are accessible by public transportation. Open daily from 8 am to 5 pm, the entrance fee is $6 and includes entry to the museum, which has an artfully displayed collection. Parking is $1. The museum and cenote are open 8 am-4 pm daily except Monday. During the spring and fall equinox, the ruins open at 5:30 am. There are souvenir shops and a small restaurant at the entrance.

To get here, if driving, take the road to Progreso. About five miles (10 km) from Mérida, turn at a sign pointing to the ruin. It is another three miles (five km) from the turnoff. If busing, catch the direct bus from San Juan Park on Calle 69, between Av 62 and 64 or from the Progreso station on Calle 62, #524 between Ave 65 and 67.

## The Church of Umán

The village of Umán, accessible by public transportation or car (follow the route to Celestún) has a 16th-century church, **La Parroquia de San Francisco de Asis**. It is a huge domed structure built of stone, with columns adorning the Gothic-looking entry. The outside dome has an enormous cross on top, giving the building even more grandeur. Inside, the pulpit is carved hardwood.

*La Parroquia de San Francisco de Asis*

## Bike Trips

There is a family-oriented community bike run that welcomes visitors to the city every Sunday from 8 am to 12:30 pm. Bicycles can be rented for $1 per hour on the Plaza by the municipal building on Calle 62. All vehicular traffic is prohibited along the route during this event. It starts at the Herita de Santa Isabel, Calle 79 and 60 and goes north to San Juan Park. It continues north to the main Plaza and then north along Paseo Montejo to the fountain at Burger King. There is no charge to join and everyone is welcome. It's great fun.

## Learning the Language

**Centro de Idiomas del Sureste**, Call 52 between 51 and 49, ☎ 923-0954 or 923-0083, www.cis.com, offers Spanish for foreigners, in their downtown campus. For the more advanced, they have classes in Yucatán culture, Mexican literature or Maya history. For Spanish classes, you can join a group of one to six students for a minimum of one week. Most students take four weeks. The cost is $500 for five hours of study per day plus home stay for one week and $355 without home stay. Private tutorials are $25 per hour. Four weeks come at a bargain, costing just $1,580 with home stay. Many places offer Spanish classes and there are complaints and compliments for every one of them. How well you do in any program depends on how much you want to learn. Don't waste your pesos if you

are going to speak your native language the minute you leave the classroom.

## Tour Operators

**Ecoturismo Yucatán**, #235 Calle 3 between 32A and 34, ☎ 920-2772, http://ecoyuc.com.mx, info@ecoyuc.com, are big on bird-watching and natural history tours. They can arrange your stay for the bird festival. However, they also offer diving and kayaking tours. A 10-day guided birding tour will cost about $2,300 per person, double-occupancy. If an 11-hour bicycle tour that includes swimming and cave exploration is your thing, it will cost a mere $120 and all you have to supply is some snorkeling gear, a bathing suit, biking clothes, a flashlight, a youthful spirit and good health. This is a good tour. They also have cave and cenote tours that take most of a day and cost about $50 per person. It is advisable to book these tours a few days in advance.

**Expreso Maya Train**, ☎ 800-717-0108, www.railsnw.com/Tours/Expreso/tour6.htm, is a private tour operator that offers all-inclusive luxury trips. The most popular is from Villahermosa through Palenque, Campeche, Chichén Itzá to Mérida, with stops between Villahermosa and Mérida. The other is from Cancún through to Villahermosa. The company also offers trips to Chichén Itzá, Uxmal and Campeche from Mérida. The trains travel an average of 25 km per hour. The cost will run about $2,100 for five days, with some tours being a week while others are just two days. Gourmet meals are served, five-star hotels are included and the more popular Maya sites are visited.

**Turitransmerida**, #495 Calle 55 and 58, ☎ 924-1199, www.turitransmerida.com.mx, runs tours to Celestún, Chichén Itzá, Uxmal and Kabáh, and to the Loltun caves and the Puuc Route. Most tours are in an air-conditioned bus with English-speaking guides and include lunch and refreshments. They leave between 8:30 and 9 am and

return between 4:40 and 6 pm. The cost depends on the trip but runs from $40 and up.

**Viajes y Ecoturismo**, #502 Calle 55 between 60 and 62, ☎ 928-6063, offers group tours to the cenotes, leaving at 8 am from your hotel. They stop to see the church and yard where Friar Landa performed his "Mexican Inquisitions" (see page 11). The cost for four persons is $160 and for eight it is $315.

**Orbitur**, #480 Calle 6 between 19 and Colon, Colonia Garcia Gineres, ☎ 920-3085, www.orbitur.com.mx, offers tequila tasting tours that can last between 2½ hours and 4½ hours. The trips include transportation, entrance and tours to the liquor houses where the tequila is fermented and distilled, free tasting and discounted shopping. The cost is between $30 and $70, depending on which tour you choose. They also offer birding tours and visits to archeological sites.

## Car Rentals

**Easyway Rent-a-Car**, # 484 Calle 60 between 55 and 57, ☎ 930-9021 or 930-9500, has small VW Pointers, Jettas and Sedans or the larger Nissan Tsuru that cost as little as $100 per week during low season. The cars are in excellent shape and the prices are comparable to others in town.

**Mexico Rent-a-Car**, #491 Calle 57-A, ☎ 923-3637, is on the side-street (57-A) off Calle 60. Most of the chain car rental offices (Avis, Budget, etc) are on Calle 60. Mexico Rent-a-Car has a second location at #483 Calle 62. They have all sizes of vehicles available at the best prices in town. If you are going to be late returning the car, call them early and there will be no problem. What I really liked about this company was that they took me to the car, showed me how every little gadget worked, including the spare tire, gave me a long but valuable lecture on how to prevent problems with the law and drew a map showing the easiest route out of town. They also do tours, so stop in and talk to them.

There are military checkpoints in Mexico. If stopped, you will find the soldiers polite and respectful. They are checking for drugs, arms and contraband. If you are innocent, they won't bother you. If you're not, hasta la vista!



## Nightlife

**Eladio's**, #593 Calle 92, ☎ 984-0057, open 11 am to midnight, is a popular pub where local appetizers (botanas) are free for as long as you consume

their expensive ($5+) beer. You can also order a Mexican dish for dinner that will run around $10. The cheese relleno is most popular. It consists of a tortilla filled with hamburger, raisins, eggs and salsa, all crowned with a thick slab of melted cheese. The live music is often worth the price of the beer. If surfing for info on this bar, note that there is also a bail service by the same name should you land in jail.

**Margaritas** are simple drinks served in an iced glass with a salted rim. Inside is a blend of 33% lime juice (should be freshly squeezed), 33% Cointreau and 33% tequila (must be 100% Agave Spirit to be a truly good Mexican Margarita). Margaritas purchased on the beach made with old lime juice, poor-quality tequila and sugared water are called Cruise-Ship Slurpees.

**El Trovador Bohemio**, #504 Calle 55 between 60 and 62 on the south side of Santa Lucia Park, ☎ 923-0385, is open from 9 pm to 2 am daily. The nightclub has been in business for over 20 years offering romantic evenings of music and dance. This is not your Cancún-styled disco bar.

**Botanas** are appetizers served in Mexican drinking houses at no cost to the customer. They can include tacos, cucumbers in lemon sauce, beets and lemon/cilantro, pigs' knuckles or ears, ceviche, humus, nuts, fresh-shaved ginger, spinach balls, empañadas, salted chips, and on and on.

**El Lucero del Alba**, #493 Calle 47 and 56, ☎ 924-8099, open at noon, is an old fashioned tavern with ice cold beer and warm, friendly waiters. Their free botanas are reputed to be the best in town.

**Tequila Rock**, Av Montejo and Campestre, ☎ 944-1828, is a disco with loud pop music, reasonably priced beer and a crowded dance floor.

## Shopping

The **Municipal Market**, open every day from 8 am to 8 pm, is of interest to both tourists looking for handicrafts and locals seeking fresh produce.

**Casa de los Artistas**, #405 Calle 60 between 43 and 45, ☎ 928-6566, www.artistsinmexico.com, is a great place for artists to exchange ideas,

make connections or just purchase some of the best modern art in the Yucatán. The Casa also offers workshops. To sign up, visit their website.

**Ki-Huic**, #503 Calle 63 between 62 and 64, has local crafts including jewelry, ponchos and embroidered items at reasonable prices. I did find they could be abrupt with those "just looking," however.

**Plaza Montejo**, Paseo de Montejo and Av Colon, below the Fiesta Americana, is a huge shopping mall that has some very good handicraft shops, coffee shops, airline offices, clothes, jewelry, antiques (reproductions?), car rentals, money exchange and tour companies.

**Katrin-Schikora**, #96 Calle 24, ☎ 995-3769. For exquisite ceramics this is really worth checking out. Although not cheap, the items are original and something you won't see in your neighbor's house (unless of course she's traveling with you!)

**Librerias Dante**, #138 Calle 17 and Paseo de Montejo, has a superb collection of English-language books about Mexico at reasonable prices. Their collection of postcards is worth a look as well.

**Amate Books**, #453 Calle 60 and 51, ☎ 924-2222, www.amatebooks.com, specializes in English-language books and international newspapers. Many are books about Mexico but there is some fiction and journalism in English also.

# Hotels

Again I suggest that you do not book ahead but rather shop around when you get here. If you do book ahead, do it for just one night. There are 120+ hotels and most will have rooms available. If you are trying to get into a hostel, on the other hand, booking ahead might be advisable.

| HOTEL PRICE CHART | |
|---|---|
| Cost per night for two before tax | |
| $ | Under $50 |
| $$ | $51-$100 |
| $$$ | $101-$175 |
| $$$$ | $176-$250 |
| $$$$$ | Over $250 |

**Hotel Mucuy**, #481 Calle 57 between 56 and 58, ☎ 928-5193, $, is a great budget hotel with clean rooms and a fairly new pool in their pleasant garden. There is no air conditioning and parking is extra. English and French are spoken.

**Hotel Los Arcos**, #501 Calle 63 between 62 and 64, ☎ 924-9728, $, has large rooms with fans, hot water and free coffee in the mornings. There is also off-street parking and a small courtyard. It is safe, clean and just two blocks from the Plaza.

**Hotel El Español**, #543 Calle 70 and 69, ☎ 923-2854, $. There are 50 compact but clean rooms with air conditioning and a pool on site, plus a small

restaurant. The best draw is the helpful staff and proximity to the bus stations. It's a good deal and just a 10-minute walk to the Zocalo.

**Hotel Reforma**, # 508 Calle 59 and 62, ☎ 924-7922, $, has 50 air-conditioned colonial-style rooms on two levels around a central courtyard. Continental breakfast is included in the price and there is also a bar, pizzeria and pool, which can be a blessing during the hot season.

**Hostel Zocalo**, # 508 Calle 63 between 60 and 62, ☎ 930-9562, $, is right on the Zocalo. The hotel, which occupies an 1800s colonial house, is always full, so if you want the cheapest place in town that is of an acceptable standard, book ahead. I didn't get a chance to try it out but a full house is usually a good house. Included are sheets, full breakfast and purified water.

**Flamingo Hotel**, #485 Calle 57 between 56 and 58, ☎ 924-7755, $, www.hotelflamingo.com.mx, has 38 air-conditioned rooms with color cable TV. Some rooms are rather "interesting" in their décor but, all in all, it's not a bad deal if you are stuck. Continental breakfast is included in the price. There is a restaurant and private parking. Local businesses advise travelers not to stay here unless there is no other option.

*Pool at Flamingo Hotel*

**Hotel Oviedo**, #515 Calle 62 between 65 and 67, ☎ 928-5618, $, www.hoteloviedoyuc.com.mx, has 33 rooms with fans and color TVs. This is not a good deal because of the questionable state of the rooms. I haven't heard one good report.

**Hotel Posada Toledo**, # 487 Calle 58 and 57, ☎ 923-1690, $, has rooms with grand wooden furniture, air conditioning and fans, and color TV. The rooms are in an old colonial house. Continental breakfast is included. There is a wonderful courtyard and private parking. For this price range, it's a deal.

**Hotel Santa Ana**, #503 Calle 45 between 60 and 62, ☎ 923-3331, $, has 19 small, spotless rooms in a quiet colonial building.

**Hotel Santa Lucia**, #508 Calle 55, ☎ 928-2672, $, has 51 air-conditioned rooms that are spacious, clean, comfortable and basic. There is a lovely garden and a pool that the rooms overlook. Private parking is included. The biggest complaint is that the air conditioners are noisy.

**Hotel Boulevard Infante**, #587, Calle 73 and 75, ☎ 984-1025, $$, www.hotelboulevardinfante.com, has about 60 air-conditioned rooms close to the airport so it's great for anyone taking a very early or very late flight. The hotel is across from Los Henequenes Restaurant and a supermarket.

**Angeles de Mérida B & B**, Calle #494-74A between 57-59, ☎ 923-8163, $$, www.angelesdemerida.com, has four luxurious rooms, tastefully decorated and tucked into an old colonial home just seven blocks from the Zocalo. The building was renovated in 2004 and has high beamed ceilings, air conditioning, antiques and original art throughout, a pool surrounded by lush gardens and a formal dining room where meals are served. English is spoken, spa services are available and hospitality is warm. It is a good idea to reserve ahead.

*Angeles de Mérida*

**Casa Esperanza**, #476 Calle 54 between 55 and 57, ☎ 923-4711, $$, www.casaesperanza.com, is, as the name suggests, the house of hope. You'll have all your "hopes" fulfilled if you stay here. Designed by the same architect who designed the Canton Palace, this colonial building has open, beamed ceilings, stained glass windows and hand-painted tiles throughout. There is a flower garden around the patio that also has fountains and a pool. When you arrive, you will receive a welcoming drink and will be able to converse with your hosts in Spanish or English. The heart-smart breakfast is a feast that will keep you touring all day with no tummy grumbles. At time of writing, a cookbook was being published for those who are entranced with the menu.

*Casa Esperanza*

**Gran Hotel**, #496 Calle 60 and 59, ☎ 923-6963, $$, www.granhoteldemerida.com.mx, is the gem of the city. An old colonial building that sparkles white like fresh snow, the Gran has a restful garden and courtyard. Located in the center. The antiques decorating the rooms and foyer are museum-quality, the high ceilings are characteristic of the architectural

era and the tiled floors are cool. In quality, the service matches the rest. The Gran has had as guests leading artists, writers, movie stars and politicians. If you need a treat, this boutique hotel is the place to choose.

*Hotel Caribe rsetaurant-bar*

**Hotel Caribe**, #500 Calle 59, ☎ 924-9022, $$, www.hotelcaribe.com.mx, is a colonial structure with 53 small rooms that need a bit of TLC. The central fountain has been converted into a flower garden and the central patio into a bar and restaurant. There is a pool and rooftop garden and the location is in the center of town. Service is good.

**Hotel Colonial**, # 476 Calle 62 between 57 and 59, ☎ 923-6444, www.hotelcolonial.com.mx, $$, has 73 air-conditioned rooms that show a bit of wear in the corners. In the center of town, the hotel has a pool that could pass as a bathtub. The breakfast included in the price is excellent.

**Hotel San Juan**, #497 Calle 55, between 58 and 60, ☎ 924-1742, www.hotelsanjuan.com.mx, $$, has 63 rooms with air conditioning and ceiling fans. There is both a pool and private parking. The rooms are spacious, clean and comfortable, the staff helpful and the location is excellent. Recommended.

**Hotel Lord de Mérida**, #516 Calle 63 between 62 and 64, ☎ 923-9371, $$, is just a block from the Plaza and has 44 basic rooms in a rather austere building. There is secure parking available.

**Villa Mercedes**, Av Colon between 60 and 62m, ☎ 942-9000, www.hotelvillamercedes.com.mx, $$$, has 84 rooms that are in need of a facelift. The pool is small, the room service slow and the elevators are often out of order. However, the pink colonial-styled building has character, the gym is sufficient, the bathrooms huge and the location good. The downside is that it's .6 mile (one km) from the center. The biggest draw is the breakfast. Be certain it's included in your price.

**Fiesta Americana**, #451 Paseo de Montejo and Av Colon, ☎ 942-1111, www.fiestaamericana.com, $$$, has 350 rooms, with two equipped for those with disabilities. The rooms are clean, the gym and spa are fairly standard and the service is excellent, although the outside architecture is reminiscent of the Hall of the People in Beijing – by this I mean huge and

*Fiesta Americana*

**Hyatt Regency**, Av Colon and Calle 60, ☎ 942-1234, $$$/$$$$, http://merida.regency.hyatt.com/hyatt/hotels/index.jsp. This is your classic Hyatt hotel, with 289 deluxe, regency, executive or presidential suites to choose from. Each room has independently controlled air conditioning, robes, wired and wireless Internet, in-room safe, marble bath and so on. The gymnasium is good but the pool is in the shade, rather than in the sun the way you might prefer it.

austere. One problem is that street noise can be heard no matter which room you choose. Luckily, Mérida is not a party town. The big draw for many are the shops on the lower level, including a number of restaurants and bars. Of the three hotels in the vicinity, this one seems to be the best.

*Hyatt Regency*

# Restaurants

Sitting at any of the outdoor restaurants around the Plaza is a delight for both food quality and people-watching. The pleasant climate too dictates this.

**Pok-a-chuk** is a thinly sliced leg of pork, marinated in lime juice and then grilled crisp. Served with rice and a spicy onion relish, pok-a-chuk is the most popular traditional Yucatán dish and it can be purchased at restaurants for about $6.

**Ki'Xocolatl,** #513 Calle 55 between 60 and 62, ☎ 920-5869, is the Mexican version of Death by Chocolate, where you can get everything from Maya

drink selections to the best snacks, all made from chocolate. You can also purchase cooking chocolate to use at home or bars to eat on the trail.

**Café La Habana,** #511 Calle 59 and 62, ☎ 928-6502, open 24 hours, $, has real coffee that is roasted and ground right here. If you have some with a piece of their chocolate cake, you'll be set to tour until happy hour.

**Casa de Frida**, #526 Calle 61, ☎ 928-2311, open 6 pm to midnight, is decorated with photos of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera. The meals run an average of $10, and the crêpes de mole con pollo were very good. Their menu offers some seasonal dishes. The chiles en nogada are often talked about, but I have not tried them.

**Frida Kahlo** and **Diego Rivera**, notorious artists who lived in Mexico City during the communist era before World War II, were friends with the communist, Leon Totsky before he was hacked to death with an ice pick in 1940 by one of Stalin's henchmen. Rivera's murals (one depicting Trotsky and Lenin, above) decorate the government palace in Mexico City.

**Villa Maria,** Calle 59 and 68, ☎ 923-3357, is open from 2 pm to midnight daily except Sunday, when it is open only until 10 pm. This is an elegant restaurant in a restored colonial hotel. The French Mediterranean cuisine, served on white linen table cloths, should be accompanied by a wine chosen from their international selection. An entrée is $20-$25 per person. The beef bourguignon cooked with mushrooms, onions and red wine is recommended.

**Amaro**, Calle 59 between 60 and 62, ☎ 928-2451, is open from 11 am to 2 am daily. This is the best vegetarian restaurant in town, but they also serve meat. The colonial house is the birthplace of Andres Quintana Roo. There is live music every evening.

Andres Quintana Roo was born in Mérida in 1787. He was a writer and politician, as well as a strong leader of the independence movement. He helped draft the Declaration of Independence in 1813 and then served as a legislator, senator and secretary of state. The state of Quintana Roo, part of the Yucatán peninsula, was named after him.

**La Quilla**, #414 Calle 60 between 45-43, (no phone), open 8 pm-2 am daily, no cover charge, www.laquilla.blogspot.com, is an artistic center with art on the walls and musicians on the stage. International foods are offered, including Thai and Italian dishes. For information about exhibitions and entertainment see their all-Spanish website. Recommended.

**El Gran Café**, at Hotel Gran, #496 Calle 60 and 59, ☎ 923-5356, has a Saturday dinner buffet priced at $7.50 for adults and $4 for children. It's definitely worth trying. They start serving after 5 pm.

**Pollo** or **Conchinita Pibil** is chicken or pork marinated in sour orange juice, garlic and cumen for 24 hours. It is then wrapped in banana leaves and baked. Delicious.

**Restaurant Las Vigas**, #501 Calle 63, is upstairs at the Hotel Los Arcos. They are known for their onion rings ($2.50) and club sandwiches ($3.50). You can also order salad, soup and chicken dinners. There is also a used book exchange. The food is good and the owner is American.

**Italianis**, Gran Plaza, Fase II, ☎ 948-4597, has fresh pasta for those in spaghetti withdrawal. I recommend a delicious chicken parmesan, salad, garlic bread and tea for under $5.

**Pan y Vino**, #496 Calle 62 between 59 and 61, (no phone), open Monday to Saturday 1 pm to 11 pm and Sunday from 6 pm to 11 pm. They make their own pasta daily and have a complimentary international wine list. A lasagna costs about $8 per serving.

**Mr Banderas**, #501 Calle 61 between 60 and 62, on the Plaza, ☎ 930-9256. A noisy bar features dancing/karaoke after 10 pm, while a quiet restaurant offers candle-lit dinners. Special hours are between 5 pm and 9 pm when both the meals and the prices are special. I recommend the cevichi de camarones ($4) with a cool beer. This is a good place.

Throughout the Yucatán, you'll find strolling minstrels eager to play their favorite tune while you sip (rapidly) your rum and lime juice. The musicians can be recognized by their white guyaberas (traditional shirts), black bum-tight pants and western guitars. Their music usually consists of romantic love songs and they patronize anyone sitting or eating. You are expected to contribute to their financial well-being after they've completed their serenade ($1-$2). The custom started in the 1890s when musicians wanted to relay the poetic stories of their past and, I suspect, copy the mariachi bands from Jalisco that were making such a huge splash in the world of music. Ricardo Palmerin is a famous Yucatán musician who co-wrote *La Peregrina* with Luis Vega. See page 267 for the story.

**Almendros,** Calle 50 and 57, ☎ 923-8135, is open 10 am to 11 pm daily. Peer pressure made me include this old-time favorite. My traveling friend loves it. But, I feel that it is over-rated. Mexican dishes such as Poc-Chuc, Salbutes or Pollo Pibil cost $5-$10 and are OK but not spectacular.

**San Ildefonso Teya**, Km 12.5 Mérida/Cancún Road, ☎ 988-0800, www.haciendateya.com, is an elegantly restored home built in 1683. Restoration was started in 1974 by owner Jorge Cardenas Gutierrez and took 20 years to complete. Located on 99 acres of forest, orchards and gardens, the six colonial rooms with modern comforts are available for weddings. This hacienda is better known for its meals and conventions than as a hotel and the swimming pool in the center of the dance floor is a highlight. Its biggest claim to fame was to serve a meal in 1999 to Hilary Clinton of the US Senate. That's recommendation enough, but they have also hosted Queen Sofia of Spain, the President of Lithuania and the Duke of Luxembourg. An average chicken dinner will run about $12 per person but the big draw is the traditional Mérida meal of Poc-Chuc.

**La Parilla**, #87 Paseo de Montejo and 17, ☎ 944-3999, or Calle 60 between 59 and 61, ☎ 928-1691 (in center), is open from 11 am until the last customer leaves. There is wild, live music on weekends. There is no cover charge but meals cooked on the grill (as with all Parillas in Yucatán) are popular. Try the pan-fried cheese, followed by a Caesar salad and topped with peppered steak. All this costs less than $20 per person and their menu is extensive.

# North of Mérida to Progreso

If you are in search of a bustling sea-side village that has white beaches, cool breezes and fresh-fish meals, Progreso, north of Mérida, is a good destination. With a population of a mere 45,000 people, a 16-block Malecón dotted with upscale restaurants, numerous points of interest such as mangrove swamps and Maya ruins reachable within a day trip, this seaside village is a must visit. Just 20 miles (35 km) from Mérida along a triple-lane highway, it is accessible by car, bus or boat.

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*Progreso Beach & dock*

Progreso arose out of the sea to fulfill the need of a deep-sea port when Sisal to the west turned out to be too shallow. Prior to Progreso's birth, Sisal handled all shipping from the Yucatán but with the building of larger ships in the last 100 years, a new port had to be built. However, Progreso didn't have a deep sea canal so it built a dock, now over five miles (eight km) out to the deep waters where both cargo and cruise ships could land.

In 2003, 97 cruise ships arrived with 169,000 passengers. The following year that number had increased to 225,000 passengers. You want to be somewhere else when the ships are in dock.

## Getting Here & Around

Coming into Progreso from Mérida, you will be on Calle 80 (El Pescador) that runs all the way out to the deep-sea port, five miles (eight km) from shore, along a two-way dock.

Progreso
Gulf of Mexico
MALECON
MALECON
CRUISE SHIP PASSENGERS
Jean Lafitte Memorial
CALLE 80
CALLE 21
CALLE 23
CALLE 25
CALLE 27
CALLE 29
CALLE 31
CALLE 33
CALLE 35
CALLE 37
CALLE 39
Lighthouse
1. Hotel Progreso
2. Hotel InterMaya
3. Casa Isidora
4. Dond Hotel
5. Hotel Tropical
6. Flamingo Restaurant
7. El Viejo y el Mar Restaurant
8. Eladios Restaurant
Post Office
GAS
CALLE 82
CALLE 80
CALLE 78
CALLE 76
CALLE 74
CALLE 72
CALLE 70
CALLE 68
CALLE 66
CALLE 64
CALLE 62
CALLE 60
to Mérida
EXIT
ENTRANCE
GAS
N
HUNTER PUBLISHING
NOT TO SCALE
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If you are driving in this area on a motorbike, be aware that you must wear a helmet. The law is stringently upheld here.

By car from Mérida, follow Calle 60 north. It becomes Highway 261 and, once you reach Progreso, it turns into El Pescador. Don't stop driving until you hit sand and water.

By bus, go to the station at Calle 62 between 65 and 67. The bus leaves every 15 minutes from 5 am until 10 pm daily and costs about $1.50 for the one-hour ride.

By boat, you'll arrive at Yucalpetan Harbor two miles (four km) west of the town center. There is a navy base, local fishers' dock and a recreational boat marina. You can stay in the town for up to 72 hours without a visa but be certain to have your passport with you. If staying longer, you must go to Mérida to get a visitor's permit. The office is on Av Colon at Calle 8, ☎ 928-5823 or 928-6141, open 9 am to 2 pm Monday to Friday.

Yucalpeten may be the precursor word for Yucatán. In Maya Yu is collar, cal is neck and peten is island or region, in this case interpreted as peninsula.

# What to See & Do

## In Town

By the water near the dock is the **Jean Lafitte Memorial**, a must-see for admiring buccaneers. Lafitte was a pirate with a huge bounty on his head when the Brits and Americans were fighting the 1812 war. The Brits offered him £30,000 if he'd help them fight the Americans but Lafitte was tired of buccaneering so he cut a deal with the Americans for total amnesty if he helped them. He did, the war ended, and Lafitte tried going straight. But was soon bored so he went back to buccaneering. Soon the Americans were again after him so he high-tailed it to the Yucatán where he landed near Dzilam de Bravo, married a local lady and had a daughter. It is also rumored that he hid a ton of looted treasure somewhere along this coast.

*Progreso Lighthouse*

He died in 1827 but to this day the hidden treasures have not been found. In 1960, the Yucatán's group CEDAM built the memorial.

A **lighthouse** is near the dock where the cruise ship passengers are dropped off. The lighthouse was built in 1893 and is still active. It is 115 ft (35 m) high and the light flashes every six seconds from the round lantern tower. You can climb to the top for a good view of the area. The cost is $3 per person and the tower is open from 8 am to 5 pm daily.

The long dock near the lighthouse, is not open to private vehicles or those walking/cycling.

## In Nature

*Cenote at El Corchito*

**El Corchito**, 1.2 miles (two km) east of the city's entrance, is the nature preserve operated by local fishermen. It is a mangrove swamp with canals leading to and from three small swimming holes. There are toilet facilities, picnic tables and palapas where you can eat lunch, and maintained walking trails for birdwatchers. The name is derived from the annona glabra trees with cork-like roots. Have your boat man point them out (both the tree and the roots). To get there follow Calle 82 up from the pier to the Premex Station at the town entrance. Walk east for about two km (half an hour at a relaxed pace) to the second roundabout. There you'll see a sign pointing to the right, to El Corchito. On the unpaved road (again on your right) you'll see a dock with boats and kayaks for rent. The cost is $25 (depending how many share the boat) for a 45-minute trip through the mangroves. The park is open from 8 am to 5 pm daily. Take water.

**San Crisanto**, a small fishing village 20 miles (30 km) east of Progreso, also has mangroves maintained by local fishermen that lead to a cenote suitable for swimming. Birding here is exceptional due, in part, to the lack of people. Each boat trip through the mangroves costs about $4 and lasts an hour, although you can hire a private boat and boat-man for as long as you wish. To get here you must have a car. Drive east along the Malecón five miles (nine km) past Telchak Puerto. At the crossroad to San Crisanto,

turn right and go about a block to the office across from the baseball diamond. To make reservations (not really necessary), ☎ 926-0236. Be certain to have swimming gear and binoculars to see the birds.

## Beaches

The first beach west of Progreso is **Yucalpeten**, just 2.4 miles (four km) from the center so athletic ones can easily walk here. This is also where visiting sailboats dock. The village is mostly a bedroom community of Progreso with modest homes, some of which can be rented for about $300-$500 per month. The beach is quite wide and quiet.

**Chelem**, three miles (five km) west of Progreso, is a clean fishing village that has all the conveniences needed, such as restaurants, basic hotels and a few grocery stores. If quiet is what you want, this comes highly recommended. This is also a birdwatchers' haven, especially for the northern snowbirds (the human variety, not the Canada geese). Boats can be hired south of the Plaza for about $25 an hour to go into the mangroves and estuary searching for wildlife. The albatross is often spotted here, along with other migratory birds. While going through the mangroves you may also see an occasional crocodile. For a place to stay, there is the **Bienestar Hotel**, ☎ 935-4638, $, with funky little casitas that have bedrooms, sitting rooms and kitchenettes. There is also a pool and picnic tables for guests. Another favourite is the **Sand Castle Inn**, right on the beach, ☎ 935-4275, with brightly colored and clean rooms, $$, or the **Villa Roots Hotel**, ☎ 271-6841 or 941-7307, $$. This last one is definitely my favorite, with spotless rooms, crisp bedding, full kitchens with microwave and gas burner stoves, a beautiful pool and bar. It's really inexpensive for what you get!

The **sulfur butterfly**, so named because of its yellow color, migrates across the Yucatán from Central Mexico at the end of June or early July. As their foods are eaten, they seem to flock together and move farther south.

**Sisal** is a fishing village that was once a major port during the henequen days. There is also an old castle built to protect the landlubbers from the buccaneers who plied these waters over a hundred years ago. The lighthouse is privately owned but, if you give a nice tip, you may be allowed entrance. The beaches are lovely when you get away from the center and the birding is good near the wetlands. Reports are that the (human) snowbirds arrive in flocks! **La Palapa Doña Soca** is recommended for Maya-style seafood. To get here, ask any local and they will point. If you

wish to stay in Sisal, you should look for private house rentals. They start around $300 per month for a cottage on the beach.

**Chicxulub**, just three miles (five km) east of Progreso, is named after the six-mile-wide (10-km) meteorite that landed just offshore 65 million years ago and caused the death of most dinosaurs. Also drawing numerous snowbirds from Canada, the village is fairly prosperous.

**Uaymitun** is an upscale version of Chicxulub and another five miles (eight km) up the road. There are viewing towers here where flamingos can be observed without disturbing them. For privacy, go another couple of km to San Benito where there are huge stretches of open beach.

*Beach at Puerto Telchak*

**Puerto Telchac,** 35 miles (55 km) east of Progreso, has beaches, water skiing areas, grocery and vegetable stores, a bakery, several restaurants, a market and a service station. Along the shore there are also some small tortilla and seafood stalls. For good ceviche, go to **Bella Mar** restaurant about a mile east of the center and, for good fish dinners, try **Picuda**, just off the main Plaza toward the lighthouse. You can also try the restaurants in the **Reef Club**. During the summer the Plaza hosts many local cultural events. **The Reef Club Hotel**, 20 miles (32 km) from Progreso, ☎ 941-9494, $$$/$$$$, is an all-inclusive California-style complex of 150 rooms located on three floors. Some are wheelchair-accessible. It is a lovely place that has kept some customers returning year after year. However, day-trippers make this a destination so the hotel bubbles with the cruise ship and tour bus crowd from about 10 am to 4 pm. The village is just three miles (5½ km) from Xcambo Ruins. There is a white concrete **lighthouse** on the beach, about 40 feet (12 m) high, with a round observation tower. If the keeper is at the tower, you may be able to enter.

*A Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Northern Central America*, by Steve Howell and Sophie Webb, published by Oxford University Press, is a 1000-page tome that will serve you well in your search for these feathered creatures. The pictures emphasize the important features of each species.

Five miles (nine km) farther is **San Crisanto** (see above) with a nice beach. Another great beach is at **Chabiahu** just 2.4 miles (four km) farther. Bird watching is popular; roseate spoonbills, great blue herons, snowy egrets and pink flamingos are common. **Santa Clara**, with its Canadian gated community, is the last secluded beach before **Dzilam de Bravo**. The good thing about the beaches along here is the constant breeze and great sun, although the breeze can reach blast force at times.

*Dzilam de Bravo*

**Dzilam de Bravo** is synonymous with **Parque San Felipe**, an unspoiled bird preserve haunted with birders from around the globe. There is a lagoon, accessible by boat, which also houses a few crocs that, upon spotting you will spice your long quiet waits between bird-viewing sessions. It's best to go early in the morning and do the longer of the two possible excursions. The shorter, 2½-hour tour goes to the freshwater spring, **Xbuya Há** just offshore. From there you can go to the mangroves looking for sea- and shorebirds. Some of the red mangroves were damaged during Hurricane Isidore and stand as bleak sentries on the sand. From here the tour goes to the **Elepten Cenote** to spot fish.

The longer tour includes a trip to **Rio Angosto** or the **Bocas Islands**, a km or so off shore. Camping is permitted on the islands. The co-op in town will rent kayaks and tents for this excursion. You must bring all your own food and water.

Flora in the area is lush and includes the red, white and black mangrove, thatch palm, buttonbrush, gumbolimbo, acacia, black poisonwood and logwood to name just a few. Bring your favorite flower/shrub book.

Boats for up to eight people can be hired from the co-op located at the east end of town next to the captain's office, ☎ 912-2520. The cost is between $50 and $100 per boat depending on length of trip and number of passengers. If staying on the islands, the cost runs about $250 per person/kayak.

Bonefish are around all year but March to August is your best bet. Permits are swarming from March to November. Tarpon is abundant from May to December. Snapper are best caught from February to the end of April. Barracuda's prime months are December to March.

## Tour Operators

**K'ab**, Puerto de Abrigo, Telchac Puerto, ☎ 917-4176, www.kab-yucatan.com.html, offers half-day fishing tours for under $200. The boat will hold up to eight people and the tour includes refreshments, life jackets, and fishing equipment. The ship's crew will clean your catch. The company also offers overland trips to Izamal, Xcambo and Chichén Itzá in an air-conditioned van. Maximum number of passengers for these trips is seven and the cost is $50 per person, with a minimum of five paying passengers.

**Silcer**, Km 3.5 Progreso-Chicxulub highway, ☎ 934-0491 or 947-6767, www.marinasilcer.com, offers windsurfing and kite-surfing rentals and lessons. The wind between March and June runs around 24 knots, so surfers are attracted to this area. Windsurfs cost $25/two hours, advanced boards are $38/two hours and kites are $40/two hours. Eight 1½-hour lessons are $180, six 1½-hour kite-surfing sessions are $350. They also sell high-quality equipment, including sails, booms and masts (besides surfing gear).

## Nightlife

**Eladio's**, ☎ 935-5670, www.eladios.com.mx, is as good here as it is in Mérida so if great beer and a bit of fun is on the agenda, walk over to this bar.

## Where to Stay in Progreso

There are about 20 hotels in town, most of them three-star and charging between $25 and $60. They are all fairly clean, with air conditioning and friendly owners. There are a couple of two-star places that rent for under $25.

**Hotel Progreso**, #142 Calle 29 between 78 and 80, ☎ 935-0039, $, has 14 simple rooms close to the bus station.

**Hotel InterMaya**, #146 Calle 78 between 29 and 31, $, has 16 comfortable rooms.

**Casa Isidora**, #116 Calle 21, between 58 and 60, $/$$, ☎ 935-4595, www.casaisidora.com, is a lovely little place with pool and air conditioning in the rooms. There are rooms in the main building or you can rent a two-bedroom condo with kitchenette on the beach. The restaurant is great.

| HOTEL PRICE CHART | |
|---|---|
| Cost per night for two before tax | |
| $ | Under $50 |
| $$ | $51-$100 |
| $$$ | $101-$175 |
| $$$$ | $176-$250 |
| $$$$$ | Over $250 |

*Casa Isidora*

**Cond Hotel**, #150 Calle 21 between 66 and 68, ☎ 935-5079 or 935-5685, $/$$, www.condhotelprogreso.com, has a lovely swimming pool, around 30 air-conditioned rooms, some with kitchenettes and two bedrooms. It's about five blocks from the center and there is a park between the hotel and the ocean. It's clean and comfortable.

**Hotel Tropical Suites**, Malecon and Calle 70, ☎ 935-1263, $$, is a four-story building that has rooms with air conditioning, fans, single or double beds. It's clean and comfy, although not luxurious.

**Hotel Yakunah**, #64 Calle 23 between 48 and 50, ☎ 935-5600, $$/$$$, www.hotelyakunah.com.mx, is a boutique hotel with just five rooms. The price includes continental breakfast. Yakunah means to fall in love and you will. It is 10 minutes to the center of

*Hotel Yakunah lobby*

town and directly across from the beach. The rooms are large, tiled and cool, although the coolness is supplemented with air conditioning. There is a good restaurant, small pool and bar. The family, non-smoking atmosphere makes this a relaxing (desirable) place to stay. Minimum stay is two nights.

*Casa Quixote B&B*

**Casa Quixote B&B**, #235 Calle 23 between 32A and 34, ☎ 920-2772, www.ecoyuc.com/quixote.htm, $$/$$$, includes breakfast. It is a ways out of town going toward Chicxulub. There are numerous rates and styles of rooms (king, double or twin beds). The place has recently been renovated and is crispy clean.

There are numerous homes and villas that sporadically become available for a few weeks, a month or even longer. Cruise through the following sites until you find what you want, available when you want at the price you want.

- www.vacationrentals.com
- www.urbanorentals.com
- www.acrhomes.com.mx

## Restaurants

**Flamingo**, #144 Calle 69 and the Malecón, ☎ 934-4050, open 11 am to 10 pm daily. For a good fresh fish dinner at less than $10, you can't beat the place. Add a beer and you'll know you're in paradise.

**El Viejo y el Mar** (the Old Man and the Sea), #150 on the Malecón and Calle 19, ☎ 935-2299, open noon to 10 pm, is an Italian restaurant that specializes in seafood. You sit right by the sea under palapas, and the ocean breezes will add to the good flavor of your fish.

# South of Mérida

From Mérida, it is common to follow signed routes through villages while visiting points of interest. The **Puuc Route** follows a run of ruins built in a

common design during the same period. Ruins along the Puuc Route are described in detail in the section on ruins (see page 133), while the modern villages are included here. Only Uxmal, Tikul and Santa Elena have places to stay. I've also included the Loltun Caves as part of the Puuc Route because the caves were used for shelter by the Maya. The **Convent Route** travels through a number of small villages that have exceptional religious shrines such as churches, convents, and statues. As on the Puuc Route, these villages are tiny and the entire route can be explored within one long day, so I have described the villages and their shrines below. The **Hacienda Route** follows a group of haciendas that were rich estates during past centuries. Most of these have accommodations so they are described more in that context.

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## The Puuc Route

This is a gringo trail that goes through the Sierrita de Ticul hills to a number of Late Classic Period (600-900 AD) ruins. The major sites include Sayil and its Great Palace, Labna and its splendid archway, Kabáh's Codz Poop Palace and Uxmal's famous Magician's Pyramid. The easiest way to visit the major sites is to rent a car or join a tour, unless you have days and days to visit each site by third class bus. From Mérida, take Highway 261 to Muna and follow signs to each site you wish to visit. If coming from Muna, Uxmal will be your first. If you go on to Hopelchén along the

*Loltun Caves*

*Uxmal, Nunnery Quadrangle detail (Tato Grasso)*

Puuc Route, and you've had enough after Hopelchén, you can continue to Campeche for the night. Or you can loop north, see more minor ruins and end at Ticul or the favored Santa Elena.

## Loltun Caves

Although not really part of any routes, the caves, used by the Maya for hundreds of years, once contained artifacts from that era. For this reason,

I have included them along the Puuc Route. The caves are just three miles (seven km) from Oxkutzcab on the Convent Route and on the way to Labna on the Puuc Route.

*Loltun Caves*

To get here from Mérida, go to Umán and follow Highway 181 south for 68 miles (110 km) to Muna. From Muna take Highway 184 for about 25 miles (40 km) to Oxkutzcab. Follow signs. From Oxkutzcab, take the road past the Puuc Hotel, Calle 55 and turn uphill (follow signs), past a castle-like building for three miles (seven km). Parking at the caves is $1 and entrance is $5.50 per person. Video cameras cost $3.50 per camera per day and the pass can be used at all sites for that day. Tours take about one hour and there are five per day.

English-speaking guides are extra and they do not have a set rate for services although the guides wear uniforms and identification badges. Remember that the minimum wage in Mexico is $5 per day. If there is a complaint about your guide's tip, you may want to remind him of this.

The limestone cave once was full of running water but about 65 million years ago a meteorite hit the Yucatán. The world's dinosaurs died and the cave emptied of water. Mammoth bones and saber tooth tiger teeth were found in the cave, as were 200 stone corn grinders. It is believed that about 800 pre-Maya lived here. Maya used the cave for protection during hurricanes, and during the Caste War they fought strategic battles from the cave for 11 years altogether. There are two hollow stalactites in the cave and when one is pounded it makes a "lol" sound, while the other resonates with a "tun" when it's tapped – thus the name.

*Hotel Mision*

## Uxmal

The ruins are described on page 133. **Hotel Mision** is just a few miles down the road from Uxmal at Km 78,

*Hacienda Uxmal*

Merida-Campeche Highway, ☎ 923-9500, www.hotelmision.com, $$. It's a Roman-coliseum-styled monstrosity that needs a facelift but the price of $75 a room is probably acceptable for most. The hotel has a pool, spa, sauna, bar, mini golf, bike rental, restaurant and it offers complimentary breakfast. **Hacienda Uxmal**, just outside the gates, ☎ 976-2012, www.mayaland.com $$$$, has 80 comfortable rooms that have high beamed ceilings, large louvered windows, tiled floors, bathrooms and air conditioning. There is a huge pool, restaurant and bar as well as luxurious gardens and tour services. The same company offers 40 rooms at the smaller **Posada Uxmal**, ☎ 976-2010, $$$, also at the site. Their rooms have similar amenities to those at the hacienda. All hotels have dining rooms but, for an extra treat, try **Ppapp Hol Chac de Uxmal**, Km 10 on the Muna-Uxmal highway, ☎ 973-7912, for excellent regional food. There is often a lively party of locals here.

*Calcehtok Caves*

## Tikul

If you want to break up your Convent/Puuc route tours, Tikul, off Highway 184, is a popular place to stay. The colonial **Temple of San Antonio**, built in the 17th century, and the **Chapel of San Miguel** could be added to the Convent Route but for some reason they are not included. The town is known for its red pottery, as the statue of clay hands holding a vase in the Plaza indicates. Check in the local shops just east of the Plaza. The **Calcehtok Caves** (also known as X-Pukil Caves) are two miles (three km) from the center and are a protected cave system where hammers, arrowheads, bones and human graves have been found. Besides visiting the numerous limestone rooms, those with special guides

*Hotel Arista Bugambilias*

can spelunk (and rappel) or dive in this system. To visit the caves, ask your hotel reception for a guide.

The **Hotel Arista Bugambilias**, #291 Calle 23 between 44 and 46, ☎ 971-13678, $, is great. It's a few blocks from the center but has ample parking, clean comfortable rooms (not luxury) and helpful staff. In town is the **Hotel Plaza**, #202 Calle 23 between 26 and 26A, ☎ 972-0484, www.hotelplazayucatan.com, $$. It has air-conditioned rooms on the Plaza. Although not luxury, they are comfortable and there is safe parking available. The restaurant serves excellent meals; the yogurt is freshly made and is delicious. The meals are made from scratch so they may take a bit longer to prepare. The presentation is also appealing.

## Santa Elena

This is the preferred place if you want to stay away from the main centers while on the Puuc Route. Catherwood and Stephens stayed in what is now the museum attached to the church when they were working in the area.

*B&B Flycatcher Inn*

**B&B Flycatcher Inn**, Highway 261 on the south side of the highway, ☎ (cell) 997-102-0865 or 107-4126, www.flycatchrinn.com/contact.html, $$. Turn south on Calle 20 and you'll come up beside this lovely little B&B that offers clean, quiet rooms on well-maintained grounds complete with groomed nature trails seething

with bird life. Prices include a gourmet tropical breakfast, secure parking and tons of cultural information. Their website is a must.

## The Convent Route

This route offers 15th- and 16th-century Franciscan convents and churches of interest. Some are eloquent and ornate, while others are quite plain. As they converted the Maya to Catholicism, the Franciscans also taught them carpentry, painting and woodwork, and that is reflected in the religious buildings. The villages include Acanceh, Tekit, Chumayel, Tecoh, Mani, Oxkutzcab, Mama, Teabo, and Tipikal. It is best to rent a car and make a circle for yourself. If you wish to stay at some of the villages, I have recommended a few hotels (see below). Another option is to stay at Mayapan, a much larger city with all amenities. *The Maya Missions*, by Richard D Perry, published in 2007, is an excellent guide to the missions throughout the Yucatán. If you are a real church buff, be certain to carry this guide with you.

### Acanceh

Acanceh is just 15 miles (25 km) south of Mérida along Highway 18. It is the first on your route. The name means dying deer. It has a Franciscan **Temple of Nuestra Señora de la Natividad** located across from a small pyramid. The church was built in the 1500s. The Passion Play of Christ on his grueling march to death is enacted here each year during Semana Santa and, if you can get to it, its worth viewing. Across from the church on Calle 21, is a Maya pyramid and just 960 feet (300 m) farther, on Calle

18, is the **Palace of Stuccos** with astronomical inscriptions on a cornice. The upper frieze is of wood painted in Maya blue. Some of these friezes and columns have been reconstructed. The causeway leads to Izamal from here. There is no place to stay overnight. The ruins are open from 8 am to 5 pm daily, as is the church.

*Acanceh*

## Tecoh

Tecoh is just four miles (nine km) south of Acanceh (follow the signs) along Highway 18. The name means place of the puma and the two-block-long Plaza features the huge stone **cathedral of La Candelaria,** built over an ancient pyramid. During the mid-1500s, a small Franciscan chapel was built here but within 100 years it was replaced by this stone fortress. The two-tiered towers flank the central nave and demand a long walk up a set of stone stairs to reach. Inside are passageways with rectangle slits overlooking both the nave and the outside churchyard. The church has been recently restored and houses panels of three archangels and of St John the Baptist created by Miguel Cabrera, a famous painter from the 1700s. The rich carvings and exquisite statues make this a great draw for those interested in religious art.

*Cathedral and Ex-Convent of La Candelaria*

Visiting the **municipal office** is also recommended. The colonial architecture, in excellent repair, is worth a look.

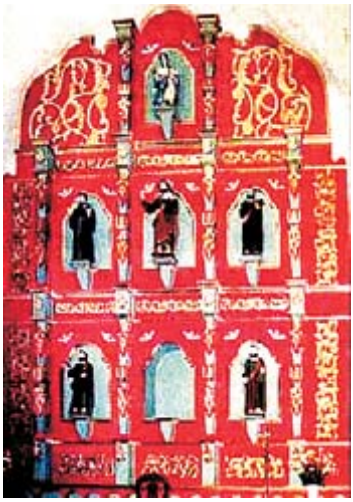
## Grutas de Tzabnah

The Grutas de Tzabnah is past the Plaza, heading south out of town and on the left. There is a sign. It is 18 miles (40 km) south of Mérida. This series of rooms and cenotes requires a map, available from the guide at the entrance. There are 13 pools inside but you must be experienced if visiting more than the first five. This cave is warmer inside than it is outside! Be certain to bring a change of clothing as you will become filthy. Carry water too. It's hot inside.

For those with bikes, there is a special bike route to **Chen-ha cenote** about 10 miles (15 km) west of town. The cenote, inside a cave, is about 100 feet (30 m) wide and 25 feet (eight m) deep. There are steps leading to the water.

There is good street food near the market and a gas station near the entrance to the town.

## Tekit



*Altar at San Antonio de Padua*

Tekit is 18 miles (30 km) south of Tecoh. On the way you will pass **Chinquila**, another cave/cenote site. In Tekit there are two religious structures, the **Convent of San Antonio de Padua** and the **Chapel of San Cristobal**. The 16th-century church is a stone, Moorish-styled building with spikes decorating the roof and two triple-tiered towers on each side of the nave. The convent next door has numerous statues and 16th-century paintings. There is no charge to enter.

For a place to stay, **Posada Señor Manuel**, calle 32 between 29 and 31, ☎ 230-1196, $, has basic rooms. In town, near the Plaza, there are a number of restaurants to choose from, none of which I have tried! So good luck.

## Mama

Mama is three miles (seven km) south of Tekit and is famous for the bell-gabled church with its huge tended garden and ornate statues and frescoes. By now, you will have seen a few of these churches, similar in design. This one is the oldest along the route and probably has the most decorated altar. The village is very small.

## Chumayel

Chumayel is 5½ miles (nine km) south of Mama. The name means the place of the seeds. This village is where a copy of the *Sacred Book of Chilam Balam* was uncovered. Dating from 1775 to 1800, it chronicles the Spanish conquest and other topics such as astronomy and the creation of the

world. It also describes Maya rituals. Finally, it contains daily, yearly and 20-year prophecies. The **Templo de la Purisima Concepción** was built in the 16th century and houses the "Christ of Black Wood." The famous festival of Señor de Esquipulas is held between April 28 and May 5th each year in this village. Like many Haciendas, the town has a welcoming archway at its entrance.

*Page from the Chilam Balam*

## Teabo

Teabo is 2.4 miles (four km) south of Chumayel and has an ancient Maya cemetery that is worth visiting. The **Parish Church of San Pedro & San Pablo**, built in the 18th century, has the most unusual colonial frescoes depicting the four evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, plus one of St Jerome. They have all been restored to near perfection. There is also an Indian chapel with the date 1617 inscribed on the altar. What makes this little church special is the balcony over the main entrance – reminiscent of the Pope's balcony in the Vatican. Inside, the rather plain stone building has some early paintings on the cement above the altar. The name of the town means "place of the plum." Teabo is known for its exquisitely embroidered dresses so, if this is on your "purchase" list, it's a good stop. Refreshments can be bought in town and basic rooms are available.

*Church of San Pedro & San Pablo*

The Four Evangelists are portrayed by St. Jerome in the Christian bible as a winged man, an ox, a lion and an eagle. These symbols were adopted from the Jewish prophet Ezekiel's interpretation of the animals of the Apocalypse. The symbols representing the evangelists were documented in the *Book of Kells*, hand-written in the sixth century and now housed at Trinity College in Dublin.

## Tipikal

Tipikal is a tiny village 3.6 miles (six km) west of Teabo. Its Church, built just after 1550, was formerly a convent. The **Church of the Virgin of Magdalena** is known for its exceptional carved steps leading to the entrance. This is a tiny village and should be a quick stop.

*Altar in church at Tipikal*

## Mani

Mani, 3.6 miles (six km) west of Tipikal, has been occupied for about 4,000 years by the Tutal Xiu Maya. Mani is where the first Franciscan mission was built in the Yucatán. Named **San Miguel**, the mission is known for its large open chapel but recent archeological work has revealed interesting artwork hidden under white-wash and behind altars. These include a picture behind the main altar, painted in the 1560s or 1570s, in an Italian style, of the Archangel Michael killing the devil. Another one uncovered from the same era is of San Antonio de Padua. These are believed to be the oldest paintings so far found in the Yucatán. This is reason enough to stop. The courtyard of the church is where Friar Diego de Landa in 1562, in a frenzy of zeal, destroyed about 5,000 Maya icons, 13 stone altars, 197 religious vessels, 22 religious idols and 27 deerskin scrolls with painted hieroglyphics. This courtyard was also central to the inquisition that took thousands of Maya lives.

*San Miguel*

*Mural in San Miguel*

The restaurant **El Principe Tutul Xiu**, #208 Calle 26 between 25 and 27, is open daily, 10 am to 5 pm, except Monday. They serve

tasty traditional Yucatán cuisine – a must stop for lunch. Across the street is a small hotel with basic rooms over a gift shop.

## Oxkutzcab

Oxkutzcab, at the southern tip of the route, is six miles (11 km) south of Mani and 60 miles (100 km) from Mérida. It is a tiny Maya village in the Yucatán's citrus belt. The **San Francisco Convent** here took 60 years to build and was started in 1790. The **San Esteban Chapel** was completed in 1872 and the **Virgin Pilar Hermitage** in 1697. The San Francisco Convent is on the top of a hill and has arches leading to arches to more arches. Getting lost in here is possible!

*San Francisco Convent*

If you wish to stay, **Hotel Puuc**, #80 Calle 55 and 44, ☎ 975-0103, $, has two dozen of the best rooms in town. They are clean, comfortable and inexpensive. The courtyard is decorated with lush local plants and the hotel workers are helpful and friendly. There is a restaurant on site and a funky disco behind the hotel (not loud enough to keep you awake) for those needing a bit of nightlife. There is also the **Hotel Lol Tun,** #84, Calle 55 between 42 and 44, $, the next best hotel in town. **Hotel Trujeque**, Calle 48 on the Plaza, ☎ 975-0568, $, has basic rooms and its central location is attractive. This is a nice town to stay in if you are combining the Puuc and Convent routes and you can't go any farther.

*The market in Oxkutzcab*

# The Hacienda Route

Haciendas are the new luxury experiences in Mexico so if you do the Hacienda Route, booking ahead is recommended. The haciendas are usu-

ally located outside of cities and towns on large estates. For history buffs they usually have interesting stories attached. Almost all are restored to the old style with modern comforts unobtrusively included.

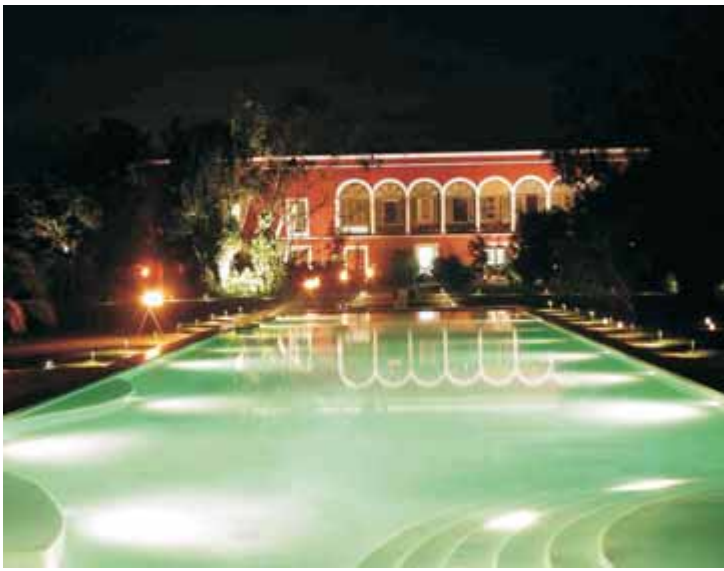
## Hacienda Xcanatun

*Bedroom at Xcanatun*

Hacienda Xcanatun, Km 12 Mérida/Progreso Road, ☎ 941-0273, www.xcanatun.com, $260 per night, has 18 colonial-style rooms with high beamed ceilings and antique tiled floors. The beds are canopied and the furniture handcrafted. The décor includes original Peruvian paintings. The bathrooms have oversized stone or hydrotherapy tubs. The gardens, like the restaurant, are remarkable. Hanging bougainvillea and hibiscus drapes the balconies and patios, spreading out to garnish the nine acres that surround the hacienda. It took five years for the owners to restore this 19th-century building, which was on the same property as the Dzibilchaltun Ruins. Now they are separate properties. There is also a spa, horseback riding and two swimming pools. The award-winning restaurant, **Casa de Piedra**, offers meals with a French flavor combined with Caribbean spicing. One option might be cochinita in chiles (spicy pork) as an appetizer, followed by sesame crusted tuna and cobia served over roasted red onions, or oven-dried tomatoes smothered in basil and rosemary. If beef is your preference, they have Argentinean steak that can be cut with a fork. An average cost for two with one drink each would be under $60. The restaurant is open daily from 7:30 am to 11 pm and till 6 pm on Sundays. You can eat in the old machine house or on the patio. The atmosphere is delightful either way.

*Xcanatun*

## Hacienda Temozon



*Hacienda Temozon*

Hacienda Temozon, Km 45 Mérida/Campeche Road, ☎ 923-8089, www.the-haciendas.com, $275 per day. The tree-lined entrance begins the exotic experience of the hacienda. There are 26 spacious, luxury accommodations and a spa located in a cave with a cenote. The plunge pools on the private patios outside each room are filled with flower petals each day and the rooms with flowers. The air-conditioned rooms have 18-foot open-beam ceilings, massive iron beds and hand-carved hardwood furnishings. The fact that President George Bush stayed here in 2007 could be a positive or a negative, depending on your political leanings. The hacienda has tennis courts, mountain bikes, horseback riding, cenotes, a large pool and a library. The 17th-century church on the property has been restored.

## Hacienda San José Cholul

*Hacienda San Jose Cholul*

Hacienda San José Cholul, Km 68 off the Mérida/Cancún Road, ☎ 923-8089, www.luxury-yucatán-haciendas.com/more-about/san-jose.htm, $400-$700 per night for two (more during Easter and Christmas). This place has a splendid history, going back to its beginning in 1549 when it was owned by San José Cholul and passed through many

hands. It was used for sugar cane farming, sisal production, as a religious center and it was even auctioned off at one time for back taxes. Eventually it went to Elba Canton de Basares, who restored it in 1998 to its present state. If you are interested, go to the website to read the details of this extensive story. The 15 rooms and suites include all the amenities, plus a private terrace or garden and plunge pool outside the suites. Being a smaller hacienda, it can deliver an especially luxurious ambiance.

## Hacienda Santa Rosa

Hacienda Santa Rosa, Km 120 on the old highway to Campeche, ☎ 923-8089, www.thehaciendas.com, $400-$500 per night/double, is a luxury oasis that requires booking for a minimum of three nights. Chances are you'll either come back or stay longer. Most of the 11 rooms have plunge pools and private gardens and the main building, where the restaurant is located, makes you think you've been time-warped back 200 years.

*Hacienda Santa Rosa*

## Hacienda Katanchel

Hacienda Katanchel, 28 miles (45 km) east of Mérida on the Cancún Road, ☎ 888-882-9470, www.haciendakatanchel.com, $300-400 per day. This began as a Maya astronomical observation site. The name Katanchel means "milky way" in Maya. Once the Spanish arrived, the area became a cattle ranch and then a henequen finca. However, when the henequen boom went bust in the 1950s, the hacienda was abandoned and overgrown with jungle. Recently it was purchased by a couple who, while cutting back the jungle, found 33 buildings that at one time housed the henequen workers. They converted the buildings into luxury suites for guests. There were also six new units constructed with opulence in mind. The original factory was redesigned as a restaurant.

## Hacienda Yaxcopoil

Hacienda Yaxcopoil, 20 miles (32 km) south of Mérida on Federal Highway #261 at Km 186 (along the Puuc Route), ☎ 900-1193, www.yaxcopoil.com, is open 8 am to 6 pm daily except Sunday when it is open from 9 am to 1 pm. It costs $5 to tour. The hacienda is distinguised by its outstanding Moorish archway at the entrance. Once inside, you can

*Hacienda Yaxcopoil*

roam at will or hire a tour guide. The main building has numerous drawing rooms with high ceilings and tiled floors, adorned with heavy wood furniture and looking as it did 200 years ago. The name means "green Alamo trees," referring to the trees around the nearby ruins. The property originally encompassed 22,000 acres but now is just over 600. The Maya Room Museum contains documents and maps from the early days, a chapel displays paintings from the colonial period, and the garden includes an orchard, water tanks and antique machinery. There is a gift shop and snack bar. A small guest house offers a bedroom/sitting room with kitchen facilities for $70/double and $10 for each additional person. Meals can be arranged for an another $20 per day.

*Hacienda Yaxcopoil*

# West from Mérida

## Celestún

Celestún, the birder's heaven, is set at the mouth of the Ria Celestún where the estuary – 12 miles (20 km) long – meets the Gulf of Mexico. The famous pink flamingos here are the biggest attraction. Located 55 miles (90 km) southwest of Mérida, this tiny fishing village, with its clean white-sand beach has numerous seafood restaurants and a few hotels.

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The name means "painted stone," and the town has about 4,500 residents, many of whom are Maya fishermen. The preserve became a World Biosphere in 1979 and it encompasses 146,135 acres of mostly wetland.

At time of writing, there were no cash machines or banks in the town.

### Getting Here & Away

**By bus:** From the terminal at Calle 71 between 64 and 66 in Mérida, buses leave for Celestún every hour from 5 am until 6 pm daily and cost $4 per person. The trip is two hours one-way. The other bus station is on Calle 50 and 67. These buses leave at 5:15, 6 and 8 am and then every hour until 8 pm.

**By car:** Follow the Periferico (main highway) west to Umán and from there take the 281 to Celestún. There are signs but you may get lost in Umán. If you ask someone, they will often take you to the road.

### What to See & Do

#### Flamingo Tour

Tours can be arranged at the beach or at the entrance to the town where the road butts up to the river. Depending on how many are in the boat, a tour costs $15-$20 per person or $200 for the entire boat. The

three-hour tour goes out to the flamingo site, stops at other birding areas, weaves through a mangrove canal to a newly forming mangrove island (a truly amazing phenomenon in its own right), and finally stops at a freshwater spring (either Valdiosera or Venecia) for a swim. Neither spring has a change room. The tour is well worth the money.

Originally, the flamingos of Mexico nested at La Ria Lagartos, but after Hurricane Gilbert in 1988 they moved some of their colony to Celestún. During their nesting seasons, between December and April, there are 10,000-15,000 birds here (of the 25,000 in the entire Yucatán),

along with pelicans, frigates, herons, cormorants and white egrets. Even during the low bird season, there are thousands of flamingos. They feast on the shrimp, fish and minerals along the bottom of the estuary by turning their heads upside down and dragging their beaks along the bottom. Be aware that getting too close to these nervous birds will disturb them; have your guide stay a reasonable distance away.

The estuary itself is 12 miles (22½ km) long and averages .75 mile (1.25 km) wide, with the mouth being a tad narrower at .3 mile (.5 km).

The 120-year-old mangrove island of **Tampeten** has a sandy bottom that moves when you jump and features ghostly remains of tree trunks. The mangrove canal shows the progression of the ecosystem; tree roots that gather sand and ocean debris, which eventually aggregates to form land.

A successful organization helping with the preservation of flamingos is the **Niños y Crias**, www.ninosycrias.org.mx (only in Spanish). They work by protecting nesting sites, ensuring feeding grounds remain in good condition and guaranteeing fresh water flow to the areas. They have seen the flamingo population double between 1999 and 2005.

*Celestún Biosphere Reserve*

## Walk the Celestún Biosphere Reserve

This wildlife refuge, established in 1979, was upgraded to a Biosphere Reserve in 1989. It covers 62,000 acres (25,000 hectares) and the estuary itself makes up about 9% of the refuge, while mangroves cover 59%. The rare geological feature, the petene or hummock, is seen only here, in Cuba

and Florida. Hummocks are islands of vegetation that are able to use fresh water from underground springs or cenotes to feed hardwoods like zapota or cedar. Mammals common to the wildlife refuge include ocelots and spider monkeys. Overall, the area hosts some 234 animal species.

### Birding

Walking along the estuary from town, heading east of the bridge, is best. There have been up to 300 different bird species seen on the estuary and surrounding mangroves, with three seen only in this area. Of the migrant duck species, 13 stop here yearly. For youngsters there is also the famous roadrunner. There are many trees and shrubs along the beach that host birds too.

**El Palmar Lighthouse**, found along the north shore bordering the Cholul Salt Flats but within the biosphere, stands 154 feet (48 m) high with 186 steps leading to the top. There is a second lighthouse, square in shape, that has been abandoned. No records exist of when these lighthouses were built. The salt flats, during dry season, are home to turtles, crustaceans, frogs and the eggs of fish. Once the rains arrive, the flats seethe with life; the turtles head to sea, the frogs and crustaceans come out of hibernation and the fish eggs hatch.

## Places to Stay

**San Julio**, # 93 Calle 12, between 9 and 11, ☎ 916-2062, $, has nine clean, though basic rooms on the beach. There are fans and a few rooms have kitchenettes.

**Maria del Carmen**, #111 Calle 12 between 13 and 15, ☎ 916-2051, $, has a dozen beachside rooms with tiled bathrooms and either patios or balconies. This is one of the nicer places in town in this price range. There is a bike rental service here.

**Hotel Sophia**, Calle 12, ☎ 916-7707, $, is basic with no TV or air conditioning. However, the friendly owners are the draw and they have secure parking for those with cars.

**Hotel Sol y Mar**, #104 Calle 12 between 11 and 13, ☎ 916-2166, $, has 18 air-conditioned rooms and a very wel-

| HOTEL PRICE CHART | |
|---|---|
| Cost per night for two before tax | |
| $ | Under $50 |
| $$ | $51-$100 |
| $$$ | $101-$175 |
| $$$$ | $176-$250 |
| $$$$$ | Over $250 |

*Bedroom at Maria del Carmen*

*Playa Maya*

coming foyer complete with bar. The rooms are plain but comfortable. I suggest you take a room that is well away from the bar.

**Playa Maya**, Calle 12, $$$, www.playamaya.net, is about six miles (nine km) north of Celestún. They have almost 90 private condos with one or two bedrooms. Each apartment has tiled floors, hardwood furniture, kitchenette and either a patio or balcony. Although it is beachfront, the property offers a large pool. During turtle nesting season from April to July, parts of the beach are closed off so as not to disturb the mother and her eggs.

*Hotel Manglares*

**Hotel Manglares**, #63, Calle 12, www.hotelmaglares.com.mx, $$$, has 24 clean and comfortable rooms set around a new pool. Breakfast and lunch can be purchased and a full restaurant will be available soon. However, it is a short 10-minute walk to all the great restaurants in town. The place is fairly new, slightly isolated and quiet.

*Casa de Celeste Vida*

**Casa de Celeste Vida**, 49E Calle 12, Celestún Beach Road, $$$, is a family-operated wonder on the beach and within walking distance of the center. Run by Ken, Karen and Wanda plus their flock of spaniels (unique species!), this immaculate haven is for those who want to relax.

**EcoParaiso Xixim Resort**, on the old highway to Sisal at Km 10 (north of Celestún townsite), ☎ 916-2100 or 916-2060, $$$$$ (includes two meals a day), www.ecoparaiso.com. There are 15, white plaster, thatch-roof luxury cabins tucked into a vast coconut palm forest. Each cabin has two beds and a sitting area with couch, desk and lounge chairs. The cabins have fans (air conditioning with a thatch roof is a waste of electricity), safety deposit boxes and tiled floors. There are bicycles and kayaks available and a small museum featuring plants, insects, reptiles and shells, all found on the property. There are also interpretive trails and a small swimming pool that overlooks the ocean. The hotel is not exploiting the "eco" word but actually practices ecological methods of water, garbage and electricity management.

*EcoParaiso Xixim Resort*

## Places to Eat

**La Palapa**, on the beach, ☎ 916-2063, is the most popular place in town. Most people book their boat and captain here and, while waiting (usually for more customers to fill the boat), they chow down. The fish with garlic is superb and the beer is cold. They are also known for shrimp with chocolate sauce. For the vegetarians, there are stuffed peppers. All comes to about $5-$8 a serving.

# From Mérida East to Valladolid

## Izamal

The colonial city of Izamal is La Ciudad Oro, the Golden City. It has been a destination for religious pilgrimages since about 1000 BC. During the Early Classic Period of the Maya, it became the home of Kinich Kakmo, the Sun God, and Itzam Na, the God of Healing. When the Spanish arrived, they had the stones from the pyramid of Itzam Na built into the present church and monastery, completed in 1553. By 1600, miracle cures were occurring after

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pilgrims visited the dark wooden statue of Mary inside the church. But the Maya believed it was Itzam Na who did the healing rather than the Catholic Virgin. Today a few tourists trickle into the city, but mainly locals come to pray for recovered health on October 18th and December 8th, during the two religious celebrations (see below).

If small colonial towns are your thing, this is an excellent place to make your base. From here, you can explore regions of the coast and nearby ruins yet have the pleasure of an inexpensive and quiet place to stay.

Zamna, a priest, who was elevated to a god in the Maya pantheon, is credited with settling the city in the fifth century. His body, so legend goes, was buried in the five temples scattered throughout the city.

## Getting Here & Around

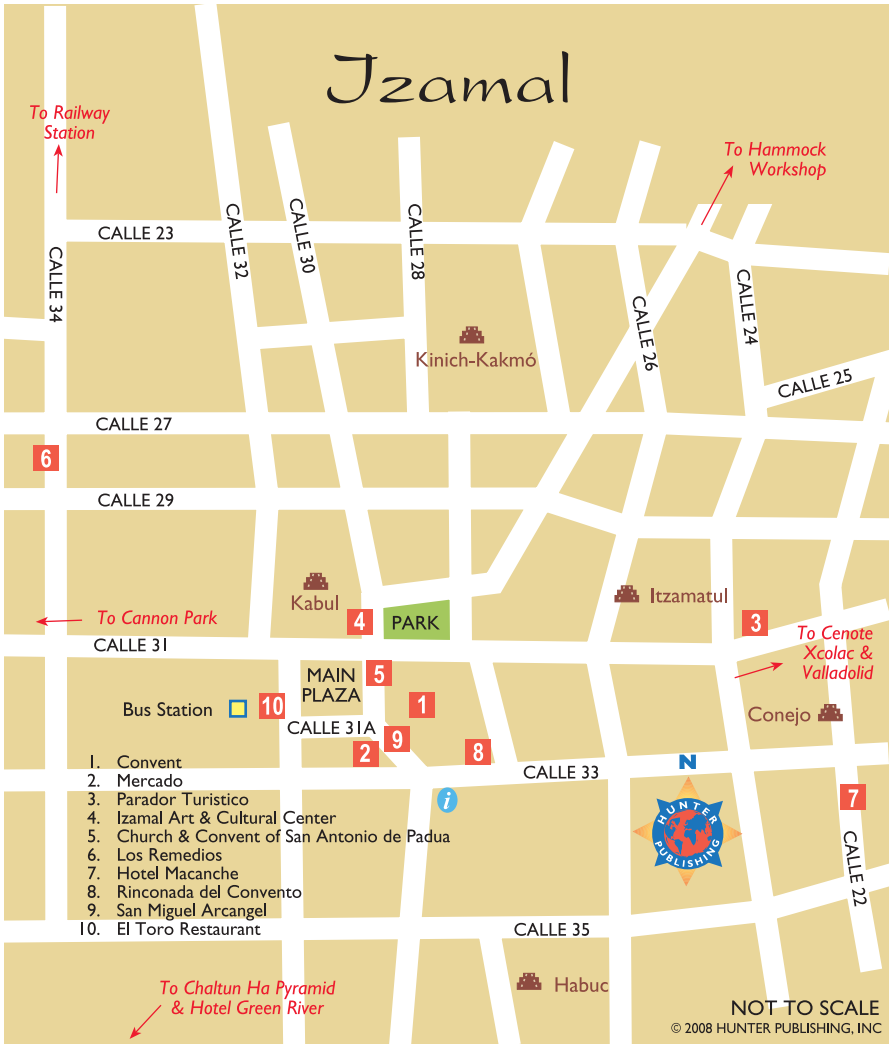
Izamal is about 36 miles (60 km) east of Mérida along Highway 180. At Kantunil, take a marked exit north, to Izamal.

For a **bus** from Mérida, go to the terminal on Calle 50 between 65 and 67. The bus leaves every 15 minutes and costs $3. The bus station in Izamal is on Calle 33, just two blocks from the convent.

**Izamal Express Train** leaves Mérida every Sunday morning at 8 am and arrives two hours later! That's slow, but it gives travelers a good view of the countryside.

There are **car taxis** in town, but the **bicycle taxis** are more ecologically friendly and definitely more fun.

**Horse and buggy rides** around town for $10 per hour are an excellent way to explore the city without getting exhausted. Highly recommended.




## Festivals

October 18th is the **Fiesta del Cristo Negro** (Black Christ), the patron saint of laborers. On this day, Catholics walk to Sitilpech, a tiny village where the Black Christ is housed and parade him back to the convent on the Plaza where he spends the next month.

December 8th is the **Festival of the Virgin of Izamal**, the patron saint of the Yucatán. Pilgrims enter the church singing to the Virgin in celebration of her blessings. There are dance festivals for days before and after this day.

# What to See & Do

## Art

**Izamal Art & Cultural Center**, Calle 29 between 40 and 42, has a museum, an art shop, and a restaurant. It is housed in a colonial mansion that contains numerous pieces of embroidery, dating back a century and more. On display and for sale are hand-embroidered huipiles, jewelry, hand-crafted miniature boxes, picture frames, hammocks and clothes. The permanent collection of paintings features work by Mexico's grand masters (including Rivera). They are described on laminated sheets in both English and Spanish. The paintings on the walls between the second and third rooms are from the period when the building was an ice cream parlor. There is a restaurant in the central courtyard. The cultural center was opened in March, 2007 and fell under the tutelage of the Fundación Haciendas en el Mundo Maya who help teach, finance and promote local art.

*Izamal Art & Cultural Center*

## The Churches

*San Antonio de Padua*

The **Church and Convent of San Antonio de Padua**, located on Calle 30 between Calle 31 and 33, open 8 am to 5 pm daily, is built over a Maya ruin. This Franciscan Church, standing 40 feet (12 m) high, and the convent are the home of Izamal's and the Yucatán's patron saint, the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception, first brought from Guatemala by Friar Diego de Landa, the second bishop of the Yucatán. The con-

vent was the largest in the Americas during the 16th century. The Virgin can be viewed in her own niche or on the altar of the church during mass. The impressive stone staircase at the back leads to the vestry and the stained glass window depicts St Francis of Assisi. The carved wooden doors leading to the main altar are exquisite. The altar itself has enough gold to remind one of the Greek Byzantine temples in Europe.

The church and convent are built on top of the Pop-Hol-Chak pyramid with stones taken from the Kinich Kakmo temple. It was also here that Friar Landa, after burning all the Maya scripts, found remorse and tried to rewrite everything he remembered in the Maya texts. The book, *Relación de la Cosas de Yucatán*, was translated in 1978 into English and called *Yucatán Before and After the Conquest*.

Pope John Paul visited here in 1993, as the statue of the pope indicates in the courtyard.

The light show, held every Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday at 8:30 pm, features a melodramatic half-hour historical performance that incorporates shadow images, orchestral music and incense burning. It was here that Friar resided, although he burned the Maya codexes in Mani and held his inquisition there too. The story is re-enacted during the light show along with a story of forgiveness by the Maya for acts of oppression in exchange for the love of Christ.

**Los Remedios**, Calle 34 between 29 and 27, is a 16th-century chapel located near a huge old cedar (ceiba) tree.

**Men Beware!** Inside this tree lives a beautiful and irresistible woman with long black hair, called Xtabay. If you pass here at night and your heart isn't pure, she will lure you into the forest where you will lose your soul to the underworld, at the bottom of the earth where the roots of the cedar trees grow. If you're not having fun on your vacation, this may be the way to go!

## The Ruins

There are 12 pyramids scattered about the town. The ruins of **Kinich Kakmo** are just north of the Plaza on Calle 27 between 26 and 28, no entry fee. It is from this pyramid that the stones were taken to build the convent. Covering 11 acres, it is also the biggest pyramid built in the Yucatán. There are rocks of enormous size scattered on the ground. How they were placed here is the subject of never-ending speculation. Also here is the chapel of San Ildefonso whose feast day is celebrated on the 3rd of April. There is an ancient well near the chapel.

There are other similar mounds in town, the **Habuc**, Calle 28 between 35 and 37, **Itzamatul**, Calle 26 between 29 and 31, **Conejo** on Calle 22 between 31 and 33, **Kabul**, Calle 29 between 27 and 31 and **Chaltun Há**, Calle 38 and 45.

### The Park

**Cannon Park**, Calle 40 and 31, is where the Spanish defended the city against the rebellious Maya during the Caste War. It's a good place to sit and people-watch.

## Shopping

**Hecho a Mano**, #323 Calle 31, ☎ 926-0002, on the Plaza, is the most popular store in Izamal. It is run by an American and the original works of photography and local art are brought in from about 20 different communities. The profits go mostly to the artists. It's a great place to see, even if you've run out of money.

**Hammock Workshop**, #268B Calle 19 between 24 and 26, has three styles of hammocks that you can watch being made. The different techniques and materials – nylon and cotton, crochet or woven – will make you appreciate what you are resting in once you purchase one. They range in price from $20 to $100.

## Places to Stay

**Hotel Macanche**, #305 Calle 22 between 33 and 35, ☎ 954-0287, $/$$, www.macanche.com, is a guesthouse with a number of cabañas tucked into lush jungle vegetation. The furniture is delightfully colorful and the pool refreshingly cool. There is a good restaurant too serving Yucatecan cuisine.

*Hotel Macanche*

| HOTEL PRICE CHART | |
|---|---|
| Cost per night for two before tax | |
| $ | Under $50 |
| $$ | $51-$100 |
| $$$ | $101-$175 |
| $$$$ | $176-$250 |
| $$$$$ | Over $250 |

**Rinconada del Convento**, #294A Calle 33 between 30 and 28, ☎ 954-0151, $$, www.hotelizamal.com, overlooks the convent and has huge comfortable rooms with tiled floors, wireless Internet and air

conditioning. The price of your room includes breakfast. This is an excellent choice.

**San Miguel Arcangel**, #308 Calle 31A between 30 and 30A, ☎ 954-0109, $$, www.sanmiguelhotel.com.mx, has some rooms with balconies overlooking the central Plaza. The rooms are moderate in size but quite attractive.

**Green River Hotel**, #342 Av Zamna between 38 and 40, ☎ 954-0337, $$, www.hotelgreenriver.com, has 18 double or triple rooms with fans, air conditioning, and cable TVs. There are two pools, two bars and a restaurant. What they do ask is that you be prepared to leave your photo ID (usually a passport) at the desk during your stay.

## Restaurants

There are a number of restaurants in town but these two have been around for a number of years and their popularity speaks for them.

**El Toro**, Calle 32, next to the bus station and a block from the Plaza. They specialize in pumpkin seed salsa, called sikil-pak. Try any Yucatán dish for $5 and you won't be disappointed.

**Kinich**, #299, Calle 27, across from the pyramid, is now in its 10th year of business, which gives it an automatic star rating. Yucatán dishes are the specialty, served under a grand palapa that is hidden by the colonial front. Cold beer can be had too.

# Piste

The ruins at Chichén Itzá ruins are covered on pages 106-113.

Moving east toward Cancún, Piste, just out of Chichén Itzá Ruins, is the next town after Izamal and where those wanting to be near the ruins stay. There is a strip of hotels, restaurants and gift shops that line the highway south of the ruins. The hotels run in price from $200+ down to $30. Once dinner is over there isn't much to do but sit in the bar and drink. All except for the most basic hotels have restaurants and pools.

*Temple at Chichén Itzá (V. Lougheed)*

You are at one of the wonders of the world so if you aren't getting everything you think you should for the price it is because you are paying for location.

Besides visiting the ruins, you might want to consider swimming in a few of the nearby cenotes.

## Adventures Underground

**Bolon Itzacab/Ik'kil Cenote**, ☎ 851-0039, is open from 8 am to 6 pm daily; entry fee is $5. To get here, follow Highway 180 east (towards Cancún) past the archeological site for three miles (five km). There are signs indicating the park. It is an open cave 85 feet (25 m) below the surface. The cave is surrounded by lush vegetation and constantly has water falling into it. The 90 or so steps it takes to get into the cave are easy; it's getting out that takes energy. This is definitely one of the nicer cenotes in the Yucatán. There is a restaurant on site.

**Yokdzonot Cenote** is just out of Chichén Itzá. To get here take a *collectivo* for $2 to Chichén and get off at Piste. From the turn-off, walk for a quarter-mile (300 m) toward Piste, where you will see a sign at the entrance to the cenote. Admission is $5 and includes use of a life jacket. The cenote is in the center and is exactly like the one at Chichén Itzá, except that this is open to the public for swimming. There are some catfish in the cenote. The female operators have incorporated ecologically sound management practices such as garbage and grease disposal. They hand-built the paths and wood fence; the plants are collected nearby and transplanted here. This is one of the projects in Yucatán that should be supported. If you can, please visit.

## Places to Stay

**Hotel Chichén Itzá**, #45 Calle 15A, ☎ 851-0022, $$$, has 44 rooms with comfortable beds and clean rooms. The staff is consistently friendly and helpful. There is a pool, a restaurant and nice gardens.

*Mayaland Lodge*

**Mayaland Lodge**, Km 120.5, ☎ 851-0100, $$$, has 90 large comfortable rooms, located on 100 acres of groomed gardens that contain three pools. The lodge is adjacent to the ruins. The big draw is the private entrance to the ruins (which is really a hole in the fence near

the observatory). All the amenities of a five-star hotel are offered, including horseback riding to the ruins as part of a day-trip and hiking some of their groomed trails.

**Club Med Villas,** Km 120, ☎ 856-6000, $$$/$$$$, is tiny for a Club Med, with just 40 rooms. It's within walking distance of the ruins. The place is quiet and clean, with pools, tennis, video room, library and pool tables.

| HOTEL PRICE CHART | |
|---|---|
| Cost per night for two before tax | |
| $ | Under $50 |
| $$ | $51-$100 |
| $$$ | $101-$175 |
| $$$$ | $176-$250 |
| $$$$$ | Over $250 |

**Hacienda Chichén**, Km 120, ☎ 851-0045, $$$$/$$$$$, www.hacienda-chichen.com/index.htm, is a first-class resort and spa with more luxuries and room choices than I can list. Some of the rooms were built by the Carnegie Institute to house the archeologists working there when the ruins were first re-discovered. The spa offers many Maya cures for purification, stress relief, and energy enhancing. They also run tours to Yaxuna, a small, unexcavated ruin, where the main feature is the Maya road leading to Kabáh.

*Hacienda Chichén*

## Valladolid

In 2008, Valladolid was 462 years old and the second-oldest city in the Yucatán. Founded in 1543 by Francisco de Montejo, the city sits on top of the Maya settlement of Zaci. This, in 1847, was the birthplace of the Caste War, and in 1910 the first plans for the Mexican Revolution were whispered throughout these streets.

The town is easily walked from end to end and the Plaza is a great draw for both restaurants and entertainment. Valladolid is much quieter and cheaper than Cancún, closer to the ruins of Chichén Itzá and the caves of Balancanchen and far more "Mexican" than Piste or Cancún.

### Getting Here & Away

**Buses** or ***colectivos*** between Mérida or Chichén Itzá and Cancún pass through Valladolid, leaving the main terminal in Cancún at 5, 6, 9, 11, 11:30 am and at 2:30, 3, 4:30, 5:30 and 10:30 pm daily.

This schedule varies, depending on which company you choose. It takes about three hours to get here and costs around $10-$17 per person.

**Cars** can follow the toll road (fast) that will cost about $50 between Cancún and Valladolid. Or follow Av Tulum and turn left at Portillo. This is the slower free road that passes through villages on the way.

**San Roque Museum**, east of city hall on Calle 39, is open 9 am to 5 pm daily. The most impressive art are the murals by Manuel Lizama. The museum celebrates Christianity's obliteration of the Maya, so it has its prejudices.

## What to See & Do

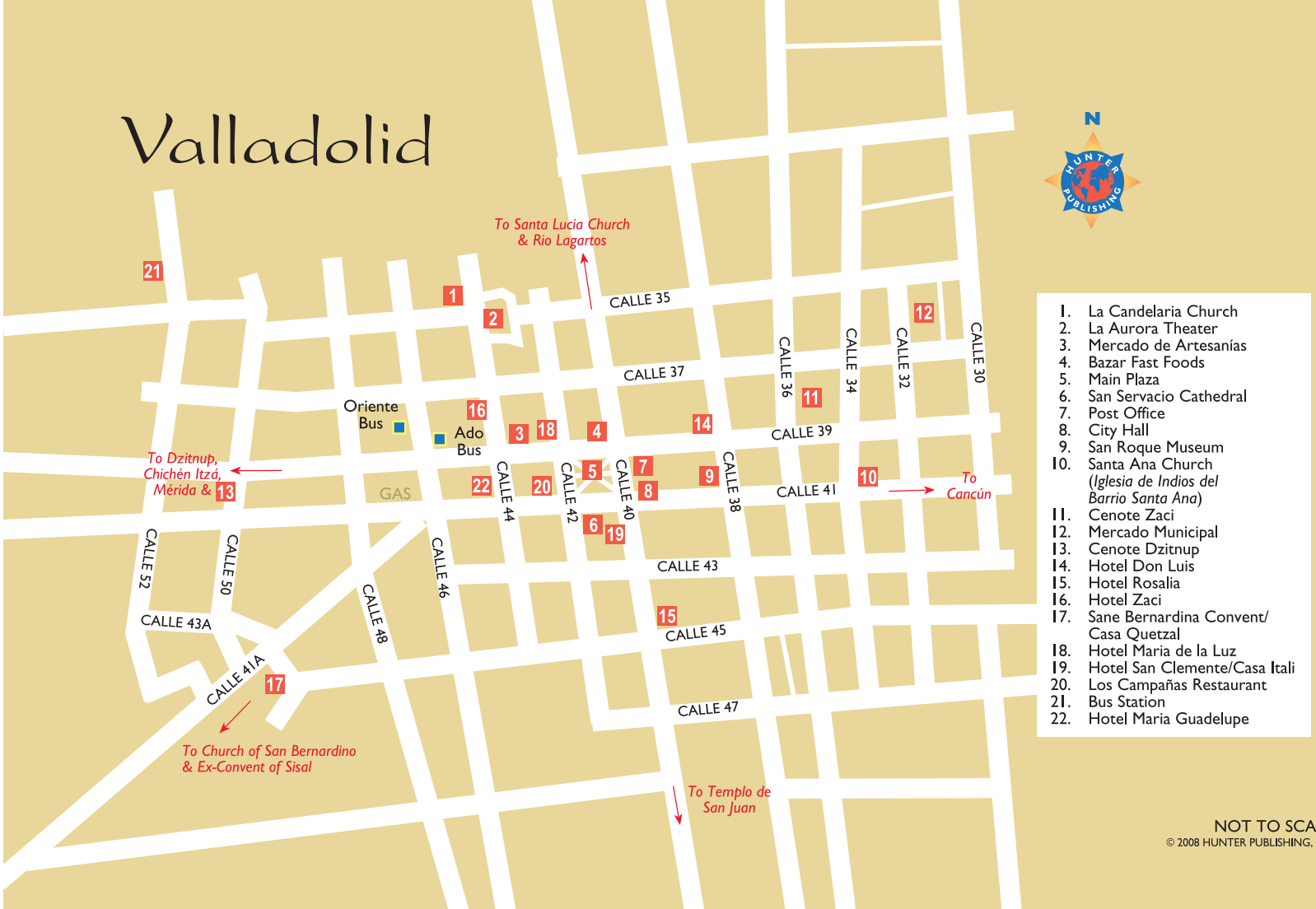
### The Churches

There are seven churches in the town. The really adventuresome should visit the tourist office on the Plaza and get their list. It should be noted that the churches in the area were all built using Maya slaves, who were not permitted to enter the village center except to work.

**Convent of San Bernardina de Siena** was designed by Friar Juan de Mérida in the 1500s. Rifles, found in the cenote on the property, were hidden there during the Caste Wars. The convent is a grand old stone building with a large courtyard full of apple trees found at the end of a cobble-stoned walkway with antique-styled lampposts. The cenote and the water wheel allowed irrigation of the orchard. Some of the altars inside the church have their original paint.

*San Gervasio Cathedral (ByeByeBaby)*

**San Gervasio Cathedral**, on the Plaza, was completed in 1570 with stones from nearby ruins. However, due to strife in the area, the building was destroyed and rebuilt in 1702 with its main doors facing north rather than the traditional west. Above the entrance is a carved snake, a Maya symbol incorporated by the Franciscan Fathers into the architecture. The large stone steeples still hold bells that can be


Valladolid
N
To Santa Lucia Church & Rio Lagartos
CALLE 35
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Oriente Bus
Ado Bus
GAS
To Dzitnup, Chichén Itzá, Mérida &
To Cancún
To Church of San Bernardino & Ex-Convent of Sisal
To Templo de San Juan
1. La Candelaria Church
2. La Aurora Theater
3. Mercado de Artesanías
4. Bazar Fast Foods
5. Main Plaza
6. San Servacio Cathedral
7. Post Office
8. City Hall
9. San Roque Museum
10. Santa Ana Church (Iglesia de Indios del Barrio Santa Ana)
11. Cenote Zaci
12. Mercado Municipal
13. Cenote Dzitnup
14. Hotel Don Luis
15. Hotel Rosalia
16. Hotel Zaci
17. Sane Bernardina Convent/ Casa Quetzal
18. Hotel Maria de la Luz
19. Hotel San Clemente/Casa Itali
20. Los Campañas Restaurant
21. Bus Station
22. Hotel Maria Guadelupe
NOT TO SCALE
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heard ringing on special occasions.

## Cenotes

**Cenote Dzitnup**, open from 8 am to 5 pm daily, is probably the most beautiful of the cenotes. It is lit by sunlight that shines through a crack in the cave's ceiling, giving it a mystical atmosphere. There is a cable across the pool in case you get tired when you swim across. To get here, follow Calle 39 or 41 west to the end of town and at the junction stay to your left for about another two miles (three km). There is a sign.

Dzonot, from which the word cenote is derived, is the Maya word for "cavity of water".

**Zaci Cenote**, accessed from the zoo in the center of the city, is 165 feet (55 m) wide and 300 feet (100 m) deep. There is a zip line so swimmers and tubers can pull themselves across or rest if they're swimming. There are impressive stalactites and stalagmites at this pool and a black fish called a lub that has no eyes. The entrance is through a restaurant or through the small zoo, The walkway goes all the way around the cenote to either the zoo or restaurant.

**Yokdzonot Cenote** is close to Chichén Itzá (see page 344).

## The Ruins

**Chichén Itzá** is just 24 miles (40 km) from Valladolid. Buses go every hour starting at 6 am until 8 pm daily and the cost is $2. **Ek Balam**, 15 miles (24 km) from city center, and the **Balancanche Cave**, 3½ miles (six km) from Chichén Itzá, are also convenient to visit from here. A tour of Chichén Itzá shouldn't take more than two hours, so, if you are spending a full day, you'll have time to visit either the second ruin or the cave. A *colectivo* can be gotten at the turnoff for Ek Balam or you can walk the two miles (three km) to the ruin from the main road.

## Balancanche Cave

This is one of the "must see" attractions in Mexico. The cave is open from 9 am to 5 pm daily and a guided tour costs $4 per person. Remember that the tour guides do not get a salary, but $5 per day is the minimum wage in Mexico so tip accordingly. To get here from Chichén Itzá walk, drive or take a bus east of Piste. The cave has two impressive stalactite formations that the Maya compare to the Ceiba tree, their tree of life. The formations in the cave are also part of the Balam Throne, once used as an altar by the Maya. A second altar can be found farther inside beside a pool of water that has blind fish and some tiny shrimp in it.

Humberto Gomez, a tour guide at Chichén Itzá in 1959, was exploring the caves when he spotted a hidden passage that took him into the entire network of rooms and halls. As he explored, he found archeological treasures left there by the Maya some 800 years ago.

Dr Wyullys Andrews from the National Geographic Expedition was working at Chichén and was summoned. When he saw the unusual stalagmite in the center of the room with numerous ceremonial items around it, he realized its importance.

*Balancanche Cave*

Besides visiting this spectacular cave, you must also go to the museum, which houses many of the items found in the cave. Then walk around the groomed trails in the botanical gardens or just have a small snack at the convenience bar.

***Luego luego*** means "right away," even though luego (said once) means later. ***Hijole*** means "Oh my gosh" and ***carbròn*** means "jerk or !@#X*"

## Rio Lagartos Biosphere

*Rio Lagartos Biosphere (EcoColors Tours)*

To get here follow Highway 295 north for about 90 miles (145 km) – from Valladolid to the coast. Although not a real river but rather a canal that leads through the mangroves, the natural preserve is about 25,000 acres of fairly pristine landscape. It is protected by SEMARNAP (Secretaria de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturals Y Pescas) and home to a large flock of flamingos. The beaches along here are nesting places for the Carey and white sea turtles and they too are protected.

**Rio Lagarto Expeditions**, #134, Calle 19, ☎ 862-0000, www.reolagartosexpeditions.com, run by Nuñez Martinez, are committed to protecting the environment. They have 20 English-speaking guides

and boats with electric motors. To get here, follow the main street past the third sleeping policeman and turn left toward the lagoon. The company offers numerous tours such as birdwatching, fishing, diving and snorkeling. Prices depend on how many go and what you do; snorkeling is usually $50 per person for half a day

**Restaurant Isla Contoy** is part of the establishment and you can eat there. The Vera Cruz-style fish (done in a spicy tomato sauce – $8) is recommended but then I also like the fish with garlic ($8). Ceveche ($4) is a must with your beer.

If you would like to stay in the village there are a few small, locally owned places. **Posada Isla Contoy**, just 30 miles (50 m) from the estuary, has five comfortable double rooms and the **Villa de Pescadores** has nine. Both offer private bathrooms, fans and friendly service for under $50. There are no phone numbers for either place.

## Nightlife

Wellll. How about some tequila in your room with a night of Spanish television?

## Shopping

The Plaza has a number of places full of Mexican-styled souvenirs that cater to the half-hour bus-tour group. After they have clicked their cameras and spent a few pesos, the Plaza is deserted. This is when I like to shop. The merchants are relaxed and have time to chat, especially about their products so you can get a decent price for your desired object. I found some of the silver jewelry in the shops around the Plaza unique in design and fairly low in price. A good ring would run around $10-$20.

## Places to Stay (Valladolid)

**Hotel Don Luis**, #191 Calle 39, ☎ 856-2024, $, is an older but very well maintained hotel with 42 rooms around a pool. There's also a restaurant on site. Because of the quietness, it is a popular rest stop for cyclists.

**Hotel Rosalia**, #216 Calle 45 between 38 and 40, ☎ 858-0844, $, has large, comfortable rooms with television, loud air-conditioning, friendly service.

| HOTEL PRICE CHART | |
|---|---|
| Cost per night for two before tax | |
| $ | Under $50 |
| $$ | $51-$100 |
| $$$ | $101-$175 |
| $$$$ | $176-$250 |
| $$$$$ | Over $250 |

**Hotel Maria Guadelupe**, #198 Calle 44, ☎ 856-2068, $, is close to the market and Plaza. The rooms are large but a bit dingy. They are cleaned daily, the air conditioning works and the staff is friendly.

**Hotel Zaci**, #193 Calle 44 between 37 and 39, ☎ 856-2167, $/$$, www.hotelzaci.com, has 48 rooms located on three levels around a small

pool and just around the corner from the bus station. It is clean, safe and comfortable.

**Casa Quetzal**, #218C Calle 51 between 50 and 52, ☎ 856-4796, $$, www.casa-quetzal.com, has 64 rooms in what they call a retreat rather than a hotel and it's next to the Convent of San Bernardina. It's a lovely little place with pool and tended gardens. Each room has double beds, tiled floors, and a small sitting area with comfortable chairs. Another draw is the wide variety of traditional Maya medicinal cures they offer plus yoga, acupuncture and shiatsu.

*Casa Quetzal*

**Maria de la Luz**, #191 Calle 42 between 37 and 39, ☎ 856-2071, www.mariadelaluzhotel.com, $$, has 70 rooms with air conditioning and tiled floors around a small pool and with a lush garden. There is also a tour office, private parking and a restaurant. Try the chicken or pork roasted in banana leaves for under $10. Excellent.

*Maria de la Luz*

**Hotel San Clemente**, #206 Calle 42, ☎ 856-2208, www.hotelsanclemente.com.mx , $$, has a great garden and swimming pool, free parking and a restaurant. The 64 rooms have air conditioning, fans, and tiled floors. As their ad suggests, this is real comfort at a low price. It is two blocks from the Plaza. When I saw this place, I was smitten.

*Hotel San Clemente*

**Hacienda Sanchez**, Calle 23 between 40 and 42, ☎ 856-5212, www.hacienda-sanchez.com.mx, $$/$$$, is a

*Hacienda Sanchez*

15-minute walk from the central Plaza. The hacienda has 35 rooms and 11 villas that have kitchenettes. Some villas can sleep up to six adults and two kids. There is a large pool and a lovely fountain in the yard. Old cars, a unique watering "machine" and a great collection of old rifles decorate the grounds. The entire building is furnished with antiques. There is a bar, snack bar and restaurant on site.

## Places to Eat

**Las Campañas**, Calle 42 and 41, ☎ 856-2365, is located on the northeast corner of the Plaza, across from the church. The food and service are excellent. The pasta with cheese, mushrooms and celantro for $4 was more than my ravenous appetite could consume. The fruit juices with milk are also exceptionally good.

**Casa Itali**, Parque Candelaria, offers Italian quality espresso and cappuccinos. For your pasta fix, try the spaghetti or the pizza staple.

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# Campeche

This state and the capital of the same name are in the northeast section of the Yucatán Peninsula. The state covers 21,665 sq miles (56,114 square km). The city is on the Gulf of Mexico 121 miles (196 km) southeast of Mérida along Highway 180. There are beaches in town, excellent restaurants and hotels and numerous historical places to visit. It is neither a quiet nor a bustling city – just a good base for exploring.

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- Xpujil 372


## History

Although archeologists have found arrowheads and ceramics dating back to about 7000 BC, proof of occupation begins around 200 AD. The Maya called their village Can-Pech, which means "Place of Tricks."

The first Spaniard to arrive was Francisco Hernandez Cordova, who stopped here to replenish his water supply. Afraid of attack by locals, he grabbed his water and left. However, a storm at sea forced him to take refuge about 25 miles (60 km) to the south at Champotón. His fears were well-founded; he was attacked and died a few days later.

After numerous attempts by Francisco de Montejo to settle here, his son El Mozo finally landed in December 1540. A battle ensued and the conquistadors won. A year later the town was renamed San Francisco de Campeche and was governed by El Mozo.

The earliest tourists to travel here were the English and Dutch buccaneers, such as Sir Francis Drake, John Hawkins, Laurens de Graff, Jocobo Jackson, Jean Lafitte, William Parker and Henry Morgan. To protect themselves, the Spanish built the first wall around the city in 1686. It is the biggest attraction in the city today. The 10-foot-thick wall and its forts or

balustrades took 18 years to complete. It extends for about 40 city blocks or 8,200 feet (2,560 m) and is octagonal in shape. Each bastion on the corners of the octagon holds important buildings. For example San Pedro was a prison and San Carlos contains the city museum. There were four gates of entry and the Land Gate, built in 1732, was kept as a tourist attraction.

*Defeat of the Spanish Armada, by Loutherbourg*

Sir Francis Drake – a major hero in England and a great explorer – is known mostly for defeating the Spanish Armada. He earned the title of El Draque – the Dragon – by both the English for whom he pirated and the Spanish whom he robbed. At one time, near Lima Peru, Drake took 37,000 ducats from one Spanish ship and then from another he got 80 tons of gold and 26 tons of silver. He died in Panama of dysentery at age 56.

In 1777 King Charles III gave the city an official seal. It is still used today. Civil war in Mexico resulted in the state separating from the rest of the Yucatán in 1857 and then border disputes with Quintana Roo led Campeche to secede in 1902.

Most of the population is clustered along the coast. Ciudad del Carmen houses the state's largest naval station. Mexico's largest oil reserves are also in the state. Inland, the state of Campeche is a humid, sparsely populated region housing some of the Yucatán Peninsula's greatest Maya ruins.

The city of Campeche was made a World Heritage Site in 1999.

# Getting Here & Around

There is an airport just outside the city that handles all domestic flights. It's less than an hour from Mexico City. AeroMexico offers three daily flights between Mexico City and Campeche. To get to the center take a bus along Av Central to the Puerta del Tierra. It is the gateway to the old town.

**Buses** arrive at Av Governadores between Chile and Brazil, outside the main walls. It is a half-hour walk from here to town but there are local buses that go to the market area (0.45 pesos) close to Hotel Plaza Campeche. It is an 18-hour ride to Mexico City and 1½ hours to Mérida.

**Cars** arrive along the Av Pedro Suarez de Baranda, which runs along the ocean, and must turn into the old city once past the Convention Center. This road leads to many recommended beaches.

# What to See & Do

## Central Plaza

There are two trains on the Plaza; one does a 45-minute city tour for $7, including audio guides available in five languages. The train leaves hourly between 9 am and 1 pm or 5pm to 7 pm. Tickets can be purchased at the Cultural Center in Casa 6 on the Plaza. The second train, El Guapo, goes out to the forts on the corners of the wall ($10).

Each Saturday and Sunday, local cultural events are held on the Plaza. I watched a group of young ballet starlets perform, but it was seeing them, with the excitement of church mice, trying to get into costume before the performance that was the real event. It was delightful. The gazebo under the bandstand is a restaurant and a good place to sip a drink and watch the performance.

A **Graveyard** on the city Plaza beside the old church (which has been built over,) was discovered in 2006 and has about 180 burial sites, many of which were for African slaves. The graveyard was multi-ethnic and was in use from about 1550 to the beginning of the 1700s. Some of the teeth had dental mutilations that were characteristic of Africans. Sir Francis Drake and John Hawkins made a fortune from transporting slaves to be used on Spanish plantations and exchanging them for gold. What is amazing about this find is that the slaves arrived in the mid-16th century, earlier than was once thought.

*Hawkins coat of arms*

**John Hawkins** purchased slaves from the Portuguese and sold them in 1562 in Hispaniola, thus starting the English slave trade in the Americas. Eventually, he and his cousin Francis Drake were arrested and their ships confiscated for breaking treaty arrangements between Portugal and England. Although he could no longer participate in the slave trade, John Hawkins designed his coat of arms to include an image of a black man in chains.

**Casa 6**, on the Plaza, open 9 am to 9 pm daily, no admission, is an 18th-century Moorish home, which is now a museum. It contains antique furniture, opulent decorative items and a lovely mural. The marble floors

SIGHTS & ATTRACTIONS

1. Puerta del Mar
2. Baluarte de la Soledad (Museo de Estelas Maya)
3. Plaza
4. Casa Sies
5. Cathedral
6. Mansion Carvajal
7. Santiago Fort/Botanical Gardens
8. Teatro de la Cuidad
9. San Pedro Fort
10. San Francisquito Church
11. Casa de Teniente del Rey
12. Puerta de Tierra
13. San Juan Fort
14. Ex-Colegio de la Misericordia
15. Santa Rosa Fort
16. Instituto Campechano
17. Ex-Templo de San José
18. San Carlos Fort
19. Church of San Román
20. Palacio Municipal
21. Tukulná

SERVICES

22. Rentamar
23. Campeche Car Rental
24. Xtampak Tours

PLACES TO STAY & EAT

25. Monkey Hostel/Parroquia Restaurant
26. Restaurant Tulum
27. Hotel Regis
28. Hotel Maya Campeche
29. Hotel Colonial
30. Hotel Reforma
31. Hotel Campeche
32. Hotel Castelmar
33. Plaza Hotel
34. Marganzo Restaurant
35. Casa Viejas Portales

add to the coolness of the building. A good time to visit is at high noon, when the heat is at its peak. It takes about 20 minutes to tour. There is also a Spanish-language library.

Tourist information (☎ 816-1782) can be obtained here and tickets to local events can be purchased as well.

**Inglesa de Jesus**, took 150 years to complete. Originally a humble thatched-roof stone building, it was replaced by a new one in 1540. The construction was supervised by the younger, Francisco de Montejo. But humble wasn't the Spanish way so in 1760 the west side Chapel of Jesus Nazareno and the west tower was added. It included a public clock and a coat of arms that was destroyed after the War of Independence. The church, in 1833, was raised to the level of Cathedral and the central section was completed. This was followed in 1849 with the second tower being constructed and finally in 1916 the clock was added. The one tower (on the right when looking at the building) was used as a lighthouse.

**Walking the Malecón** (the walkway along the sea) is popular, especially in the evenings. There are fountains and rest areas interspersed with restaurants. This is an excellent walk. See map.

## Exploring the Wall & Forts

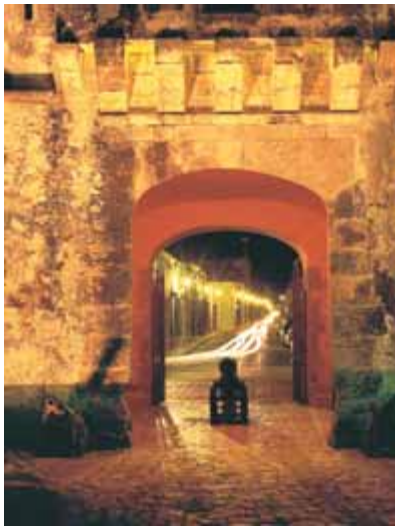
*Puerta del Mar*

Of the eight forts and gateways originally surrounding the city, seven still exist. Visiting them can be done by walking or by taking the El Guapo Train.

**Puerta del Mar** or the gate to the sea at the ocean end of Calle 59 is the closest gate from the Plaza if going to the Malecón. The gate is part of the original wall of the city and has been maintained for tourists. At the opposite end of Calle 59 is **Puerta de Tierra** or the gate to the land. It was built in 1792 and is considered the city's emblem. Its walls extend to the Fort of San Francisco. There is a Light and Sound show every Friday, Saturday and Tuesday at 8 pm. The show is in five languages and costs $5 per person. Tickets are sold at the gate.

**San Pedro**, on the northeast corner of the city's wall, is no longer a fort but rather a menagerie of art and craft shops. If walking between the bus station and the center of town, you will pass the area. Beneath the fort are a number of "secret" passages that provided escape routes during attacks. They are not open to the public.

**San Juan**, on the southeast corner of the wall, was built to protect the land wall (Puerta del Tierra). The fort has been restored to its original state and now has a "pirate" ready to take on the bravest of swordsmen (or children) who enter.



*The Puerta de Tierra*

**San Carlos**, Av 16 de Septiembre on the southwest corner of the city wall, was one of the first fortifications built. It was named after King Carlos II of Spain. The guardroom and prison in the dungeon are worth visiting. The main room has a great model of the wall and the forts around the city as they were during the 1800s.

**Nuestra Señora de Soledad**, next to the Puerta del Mar, Av 16 de Septiembre, open Tuesday to Saturday, 8 am to 8 pm and Sunday until 1 pm. Built around 1690, Soledad was the stronghold of the defense system. At one time there were 13 canons pointing out to sea. Now the building contains the **Stella Museum** that houses the city's Maya collection. Well worth visiting.

*San Juan*

**Gun Powder House (La Casamata)**, on Colosio and Casa de Justicia, outside the city walls, open 9 am to 2 pm and 5 pm to 8 pm Monday to Saturday. This was built in 1750, under the guidance of Governor Melchor Navarrete, and was placed away from the city because dangerous explosives would be stored here. Of the three buildings, one held the gunpowder, the second was a residence for the officials and a bunkhouse for the troops. The third was the kitchen. The house displays historical documents, weaponry and cannons. It also houses temporary photographic and painting displays from contemporary artists.

**San Francisco Plaza/Church** is just beyond the north wall. To get there, follow Calle 10. You will pass the Inglesia de Guadalupe about six blocks before San Francisco. This church was built by the Franciscan Brothers mainly for the Maya, who were not permitted inside the city gates at that time. The entry had large wood and iron doors. Just beyond the doors is a large stone font that was the baptismal place of Jeronimo Cortés, the

grandson of Hernando Cortéz. Next door is a monastery that was used as a fort against pirate attacks.

*El Lorencillo*

***El Lorencillo***, Lerma Pier, five miles (eight km) south of the town along Highway 180 across from Fort San Miguel, ☎ 816-1990, offers a ride on a reconstructed pirate ship (complete with sails and sword-wielding pirate) daily from noon to 5 pm. This is a copy of the original *El Lorencillo*, named after the famous pirate, Laurens de Graff. For $60 per person, you can have a seafood dinner, drinks and the pleasure of the sail. Whether you go to battle or not, depends on the pirates.

## Beyond the City Walls

Visiting these forts is free on Sundays for everyone. On other days, the cost is $4 per person and the forts are open from 8 am to 8 pm daily except Sunday when they close at 3 pm.

*Fort San Miguel*
*(Salvador Barrera Rodriguez)*

**Fort San Miguel** was built on a hill outside the city walls a few km south, as part of an outer defense system. The moat is still in place, as is the drawbridge. Inside is the **Campeche Regional Museum** with 10 rooms containing mostly items from Calakmul, including an impressive jade mask found there.

**Fort of San José el Alto**, north of the Puerto del Mar, is smaller than San Miguel. Fort San José was built in 1762 as protection against the British (rather than pirates) by the King's lieutenant José Sabido Vargas. The curved trails to the entrance were designed to prevent a direct attack by ramming. The museum has a large collection of

*San José el Alto*

colonial weaponry and revolving art exhibitions. The pride of the museum, a boat rudder carved of African black ebony in the 1600s, is one of the finest rudders of that era. It was found in the River Pelizada in the late 1800s by José Jesus Cervera y Armas and was donated by his relatives after his death. It's obvious why they built the defense here – there is a great view of the bay.

The legend around this fort is that sorcerers practiced in the basement. One night, while practicing their magical powers, a snake appeared. It so frightened the men that they ran directly to the cathedral and asked the priest if they could confess their sins. The snake curled up by the fire and enjoyed the quiet.

**Xmuch Haltun Botanical Gardens**, Av 16 de Septiembre and Calle 49 at Fort Santiago, is open 9 am to 8 pm Tuesday to Saturday, admission free. The fort has been restored, but it is the botanical garden that is the real attraction. You can rent headphones with an interactive guide in English that describes the plants. There are more than 200 different plants, including a sacred Maya ceiba and a balche tree. The fort was scheduled to be destroyed in 1916 but for some reason was left to decay on its own. In the 1950s, it was restored to its present state and the garden was added.

## Tour Operators & Car Rental

**Rentamar**, Prolongacion #59 (across from the south side of Hotel Baluartes), ☎ 811-6461, offers the best deals in town on car rentals. The vehicles are well-maintained, clean and comfortable. The owner, Ricardo, will go out of his way to accommodate your needs. I was very happy with them and I do always prefer using local businesses where possible.

**Campeche Car Rental**, Alambra Hotel, Av Resurgimiento, ☎ 811-4769, is a bit more expensive than Rentamar but they have clean cars in good condition. Insurance is included but it is recommended that you take some extra insurance just in case.

**Tarpon Bay Fishing**, #13 Calle Granizo, ☎ 811-8512, www.campecheflyfishingparponbay.com.mx, offers baby tarpon, snook or jack cravelle fishing trips that cost about $2,800 for a week, including pickup at Mérida, hotel, boat, guide, and food (breakfast and lunch, including local beer). This area is famous for the tarpon fishing and even has a Tarpon Club where men go after a day of fishing to have dinner and beer while they brag to their buddies. The tours do not include dinners, fishing gear or tips.

A good guide is **Alejandro Hernandez**, #6 Calle 57 between 8 and 10, ☎ 811-2809, www.campechetarpon.com, who knows exactly where the tarpon flats are in the bay. He can recommend which type of fly to use according to the time of day you are fishing.

**Xtampak Tours**, #14 Calle 57, ☎ 811-6473, offers one- and two-day tours to Calakmul, Balamku, Palenque, Uxmal and Rio Bec. A one-day tour costs $75 per person, overnight is $120 and two nights are $165. The service of an English-speaking guide is $70 extra and he will guide up to seven people. If you do nothing else special at least hire them and take the tour to Calakmul. They also offer camping, kayaking and riverboat tours.

# Nightlife

*The Plaza at night*

Once the sun sets, the locals appear like sand crabs during a full moon, often just walking the Malecón or enjoying local entertainment in the Plaza (see page 356).

**Restaurant Tulum**, #9 Calle 59, open noon till midnight, has live music to be enjoyed with the many botanas that they offer, as long as you keep drinking. The place does hop some nights.

# Places to Stay

**La Parroquia**, #8 Calle 55 between 10 and 12, ☎ 816-2530, www.hostalparroquia.com, $, is popular with the younger crowd. The price includes continental breakfast, storage lockers, laundry facilities and communal kitchen. There is also bike rental.

| HOTEL PRICE CHART | |
|---|---|
| Cost per night for two before tax | |
| $ | Under $50 |
| $$ | $51-$100 |
| $$$ | $101-$175 |
| $$$$ | $176-$250 |
| $$$$$ | Over $250 |

**Monkey Hostel**, #6 Calle 57 on the Plaza, ☎ 811-6605, www.hostalcampeche.com, $, has a six-bed dorm, an eight-bed dorm and double rooms. Linens and a continental breakfast (with real coffee!) are included in the price. There is a clean kitchen, rooftop sitting area, library and book exchange. Spanish lessons can be arranged from here. They will not allow unaccompanied minors under age 15 to register.

**Hacienda Puerta Campeche**, Calle 59, No. 71 Pro 16 & 18, ☎ 816-7508, puertacampeche@thehaciendas.com, . This luxurious hotel is made from a collection of 17th-century houses. The guest rooms and suites are located in fully restored, original buildings that have been adapted to today's needs. Most of the guest rooms feature 18-foot ceilings with exposed beams and rafters, 10-foot wooden double doors, comfortable beds, dark, tropical hardwood cabinets, and cool tile floors. Additionally, large, bulbous pegs in the stone walls hold woven cotton hammocks, for

which Yucatan is famous, allowing you to sleep in the Mayan style. There is a one-of-a-kind pool, gardens, and the rooftop La Guardia Restaurant.

*Hacienda Puerta Campeche*

**Hotel Regis**, #148 Calle 12 between 55 and 57, ☎ 816-3175, $/$$, across from the microwave tower, has seven rooms with air conditioning. This is a necessity on some nights, although occasionally the electricity goes off. The hotel is in a large old building on a quiet street and the rooms are around a central courtyard decorated with lush local plants. The owners are exceptionally friendly, although they speak little English. I liked this little hotel.

**Hotel Maya Campeche**, #40 Calle 57 between 14 and 16, ☎ 816-8053, www.mayacampechehotel.com.mx, $$, is a pleasant little place two blocks from the cathedral. The tiny rooms have air conditioning and fans, and there is a café open from 7 am to 10 pm daily.

**Hotel Alhambra**, Av Resurgimiento, ☎ 816-6822, $$, has 94 average-sized rooms, with a few needing some extra care, although the hotel has the best functioning air conditioners. It is just outside the gate to the sea, and on the sea – a splendid location. I found the staff a tad arrogant, but it could have been my clothing that was getting a bit ratty by the time I arrived in Campeche.

*Hotel Alhambra*

**Hotel Colonial**, #122 Calle 14 between 55 and 57, ☎ 816-2222, $$, probably has more negatives than positives, but if you'd like an old colonial building, remodeled in 1947 to include electricity, private bathrooms and fans, all for a decent price, this is the place to try. History buffs should note that the King's Brigadier General, Miguel de Castro y Aros and his wife, Gertrude Eulalia Gorostieta y Zagasty, stayed here in 1812. This fact is important to the owners.

**Hotel Reforma**, #257 Calle 8 between 57 and 59, ☎ 816-4464, $$, has 22 rooms with air conditioning and TV. There is a pool, restaurant and off-street parking. The hotel is often full. Stay out of the restaurant.

**Hotel Campeche**, #2 Calle 57, ☎ 811-5183, $$, on the Plaza, has small rooms that are presently being remodeled. Last remodeled in 1939, the rooms are now brightly painted. The staff is a bit standoffish, but they are helpful enough.

**Hotel Castelmar**, #2 Calle 61 between 8 and 10, ☎ 811-1204, www.castelmarhotel.com, $$/$$$, was built as an army barracks in the

*Hotel Castelmar*

1800s and can be seen in old photos of Campeche. Just a block from the Plaza, the 25 rooms have all the modern conveniences, including wireless Internet. Some rooms have balconies overlooking the wall. There is a pool and the price includes continental breakfast. This is really a luxurious place to stay, almost equal to the Plaza Hotel.

*Plaza Hotel*

**Plaza Hotel**, Calle 10 and Baluartes, ☎ 811-9900, www.hotelplaza-campeche.com, $$$, on San Martin Park, is by far the classiest place in town, with 82 rooms in all. The hotel is as quiet as a monastery but as well serviced as a palace. Their amenities include superb service, and a pool, restaurant, bar and 24-hour coffee shop. Recommended.

# Restaurants

**Restaurant Campeche**, #2A Calle 57 on the Plaza, ☎ 816-2128, pen 6:30 am to midnight daily, is popular with locals. Breakfasts will cost anywhere from $2.50 to $4.50, including coffee. Lunches are great. A club sandwich with a fresh fruit drink and dessert is under $5. For an afternoon snack, their flan is superb.

**Plaza Hotel**, Calle 10 and Baluartes, ☎ 811-9900, is open at 5 am for breakfast for those arriving on the 17- to 18-hour bus trip from Mexico City. The meals are tasty and elegantly served, though the servings may not be as large as some might wish. The menu is both in English and Spanish and typical breakfasts of eggs, fruit, juice, yogurt and bacon are about $10 per person. This also includes copious amounts of bitter black coffee, served as soon as you sit down. The best thing is they don't charge for tablecloth or service, which is common in high-end Mexican eateries.

**Marganzo Restaurant**, just off the Plaza across from the Gate, is air-conditioned in the back and utilizes the ocean breezes in the front. The waiters are dressed in traditional costumes and, no matter how many complaining tourists they help, their traditional quality of service

remains. They are open from 7 am to about 10 pm. The tip is included in the price. Next to the Plaza Hotel, this is second-best restaurant in Campeche for quality.

**Restaurant Parroquia**, Calle 57 on the Plaza (no phone) next to the Monkey Hostel, is a lower-end restaurant but with good food.

**Casa Viejas Portales**, Calle 12 on the Plaza above the colonial arches (no phone), has tables on the balcony. The service was OK, but my chicken was on the rare side. The spaghetti did fill me up, however. But, for $10, I'd like to see better quality and larger servings. The Marganzo, on the opposite side of the Plaza, is better.

*Campeche*

# North of Campeche

## Jaina

*Jaina Island Maya figures*

Jaina is an archeological site on an island 24 miles (40 km) north of Campeche, guarded by the military to prevent looting. Excavations started in 1943, revealing an extensive Maya burial ground for important political and religious leaders – some from as far away as Guatemala. The bodies were placed in the fetal position in clay jars along with food, weapons and jade and ceramic ornaments. Some were buried beneath the pyramids. It is estimated that 20,000 graves are here, some dating back to 652, with only 1,000 excavated to far. Every grave has at least one of clay figurine. It is believed they either depict the one buried or a loved one the

deceased wished to have with him in the next world. Due to the huge number found, the Jaina sculptures have been put in a class of their own. The style is finely detailed and life-like; some works are hollow, others solid. To visit you must reserve two days in advance with a tour office of your choice and the cost of the tour is around $220.

# East of Campeche

## Hopelchén

Hopelchén is 60 miles (100 km) east of Campeche, along Highway 261, and part of the Puuc Route. The name Hopelchén means "Five Wells." The area has many Mennonite farmers. Watch for signs advertising home-made baking. It is usually the best food of its kind in the neighborhood. There is a service station, one small, basic hotel (Los Arcos) and two restaurants on the Plaza in the town.

To explore some rarely visited minor ruins in the area, leave Hopelchén along Highway 261 heading north to the first secondary road going east toward Santa Rosa Xtampac. You must return by the same route. The ruins are open from 8 am to 5 pm daily and admission is less than $3 per person. The name means "Old Walls" and the ruins date back to about 300 BC. This was built by the Chene group of Maya and its architecture is slightly different than the Puuc, although both influences are present here. The main palace is a three-story structure with 27 rooms on the main level, 12 on the second and five on the top. Unless you want to study the friezes in detail, it shouldn't take you more than two hours to visit this ruin.

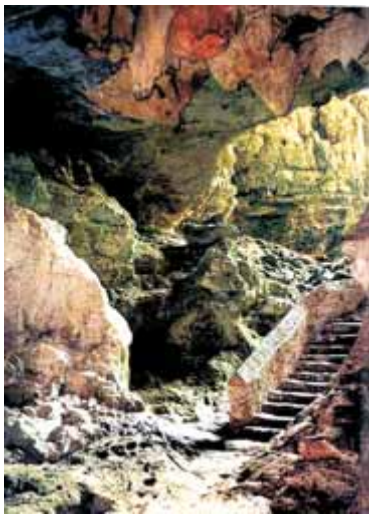
*Dzibilnocac*

The **Hochob/Dzibilnocac** ruins are south of Hopelchén along Highway 261 heading toward Iterbide. Follow the road to Chencoh (there is a sign) for nine miles (14 km). The ruins are open from 8 am to 5 pm daily, with a $2.50 entry fee. Unless you are bird-watching or engaged in another time-consuming activity, it shouldn't take more than an hour to tour the site. Bring drinks. This is an impressive little ruin and it's so nice to be away from the crowds. The name means the "Place of the Corncob." The first photographs were taken by Teobert Maler and published in *Globus Magazine* in 1895. There are a number of structures here, all decorated with masks and images of Maya gods/zoomorphs. If you look carefully, you'll see that the carvings on the front of the building depict a mask and the doorway is the mouth.

To go to Dzibilnocac, continue from Hobelchen for 24 miles (40 km) toward Iterbide. There are signs for the ruins. Open daily from 8 am to 5 pm, the entry fee is $2.50 per person. It

shouldn't take more than an hour to visit. Bring water, as there is nothing here except a parking lot and restrooms. The name means "Painted Vault" and the ruin was first occupied around 500 BC. This is a tiny site with one great pyramid and a vaulted palace, built about 600 AD. There are impressive masks carved onto the corners of the pyramid.

**X'Tacunbil-xuna'an Caves**, 1.2 miles (two km) from Bolonchén, are open Tuesday to Sunday, 10 am to 5 pm, admission $5 per person, guided tours only. To get there, continue north on Highway 261 to Bolenchen. There is a sign. The cave is before the town if coming from Hopelchén. It is a third of a mile (.5 km) long and was first visited (after the Maya departed) by Stephens and Catherwood in 1841. They produced two engravings of the cave showing a long wooden stairway leading from the cenote to the surface. In the drawing, Maya are carrying jugs of water. The name means "Nine Wells." The stairway is as impressive today as it was 150 years ago.



*X'Tacunbil-xuna'an Caves*

After Catherwood and Stephens recorded their findings, the cave was left untouched until 1973 when Eric Von Euw, following reports of looting at the ruins and the cave, went to Bolonchén to map it. The entry to the cave is down a long flight of wooden steps, the tunnels are lit and the cenote is rather small. As you leave, you'll notice the light shining in through the trees, illuminating your exit. The cave has been used by Maya since about 2000 BC.

The **ruins of Bolonchén** are 1½ miles (2½ km) northeast of the town. There is not much left to examine except some hieroglyphs and buildings around the main Plaza. The large rooms in the buildings are of interest. In 1887, Teobert Maler photographed the site showing one structure still intact but it has since collapsed. Most of the stones were used for newer buildings in the village.

## South of Campeche

Traveling either along Highway 180 to Champotón or along the 325 miles (525 km) of old coastal road, the scenery is classic, the tourists mostly Mexican, the beaches deserted and the accommodations often exemplary.

In **Playa Bonita**, just two miles (four km) south of Fort San Miguel, there are restaurants and beach palapas for picnics. It is a fairly quiet beach and is so close to town that you can walk or take a city bus (along the Malecón).

**Lerma** is a small fishing village five miles (eight km) south of Campeche where you can stop at a family-run restaurant and enjoy the catch of the day. The beach is so so.

**Playa Can** is a pebbly beach 1.2 miles (two km) off the highway just south of Lerma. There are palapa huts where hammocks can be strung. Not super but not crowded either.

## Where to Stay

**Hacienda Uayamon**, ☎ 829-1002, www.haciendasmexico.com/uayamon, $$$$$. To get here, follow Highway 180 for 7½ miles (12 km) south of Campeche. Turn left after you see the first sign advertising the hacienda and drive for another six miles (10 km). A second sign will appear. Turn right and follow the road for five miles (eight km) until you reach the entrance to the hacienda. The cost for one of the 12 rooms is over $200 a night (often closer to $300) but it's an historical building spruced up to luxurious condition. There is a spa, pool, travel service and gourmet restaurant. The pool is a matter of controversy – some love it, others hate it. It's in an old stone building with stone pillars. I thought it was ingenious. The name could mean "The Place where the Witches Come" or it could refer to the huaya fruit. The enslavement of indigenous Maya under the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz, owner of the estate from 1876-1911, is a black mark on this now exquisite hacienda.

*Hacienda Uayamon*

**Seyba Playa** is 25 miles (39 km) south of Campeche along the coastal road. This stunning white sand beach has the one big hotel where food and accommodations can be had or you can purchase a day ticket to use the facilities. There is also a public beach, accessible from the highway. Those living here believe the temperatures in January are far too cold and so the beaches are often deserted.

This town is dedicated to fishing, with a rocky shoreline and tons of cormorants and pelicans enjoying the decks of the boats. There is a small, basic hotel next to the cathedral, **Hotel Seyba Playa**. I did find some of the fishermen in town anxious to rent me a ride or just rent me, whichever I agreed to.

**Hotel Tucan Siho Playa**, Km 39 Champotón/Campeche Road,

| HOTEL PRICE CHART | |
|---|---|
| Cost per night for two before tax | |
| $ | Under $50 |
| $$ | $51-$100 |
| $$$ | $101-$175 |
| $$$$ | $176-$250 |
| $$$$$ | Over $250 |

☎ 823-1200, $$$, www.hoteles-tucan.com.mx, is an old sugar plantation that's been modernized for today's standards of comfort. Located on the beach, the hotel has a pool, bar, game room, laundry and safe parking. The grounds are manicured and the restaurant serves gourmet meals. Although the drive from Campeche along the ocean is superb, the hotel is far from any services so a car is necessary. Most of the 70 rooms have balconies overlooking the ocean; all have tiled floors and air conditioning. For a lovely, quiet rest, this is a good choice.

*Hotel Tucan Siho Playa*

**Champotón** is about 40 miles (65 km) south of Campeche along the coastal road. This is where Highway 180 continues along the coast and 181 branches inland to Escárcega, then east to Chetumal.

The bay here is known as the Bay of the Bad Fight because of the battle the Maya won in 1540 against the Spaniards. It was also here that Francisco Hernandez de Cordoba received his fatal shot in 1517, which launched the Maya's fighting reputation. This lovely little town is a bustling center that spreads along the Rio Champotón and is known especially for its excellent seafood and friendly people.

*Champotón (Vladimir Herman Miguel)*

There is an old **lighthouse** built in 1897 at the entrance to the river. It is a white square building standing 75 feet (25 m) high and its lights flash every five seconds.

There are many places to eat and stay but the best hotel is the **Snook Inn**, #1 Calle 30, ☎ 828-0018, $$, with 20 decent rooms around a small pool. It draws fishermen more than beach-goers. If that one is full, the **Geminis,** ☎ 828-0008, $, is just up the road and has 36 rooms for about $40 a night. It is basic.

## Ciudad del Carmen

Known as the "Pearl of the Gulf' this city of 150,000 people on the island of Carmen in Carmen Lake has grown substantially since the discovery of oil in the 1970s. Prior to that, it was a clean, sleepy little fishing hamlet.

Historically, Carmen was a hiding place where pirates repaired their ships and planned further attacks on their British enemies. Now it attracts oil workers, many of whom are Texans working on the oil rigs and in company offices. The oil boom caused urban sprawl at the cost of the island's vegetation. The plants have been replaced with garbage so the place looks shabby. In 1979 one of the exploratory oil rigs exploded and spewed thousands of gallons of oil into the Gulf, causing extreme environmental damage. To top it off, the dislike of the foreigners by the locals and the disrespect by the foreigners for the locals makes visiting feel like an emotional war.

*The bridge to Ciudad del Carmen (Ashig84 )*

One enters the island and town by crossing the toll bridge, Puente El Zacatel, one of the largest bridges in Latin America. In the center of town, there are almost 70 hotels that have sprung up with the oil boom. I have listed just a few below.

**Playa Norte** is just north of the bridge and the best accessible beach. You may see iguanas and turtles on the beach. There is a **ferry** that crosses the lake to **Zacatel** every hour from 6 am until 7 pm daily. It leaves La Red in Carmen by the dock. In town the **National Palace**, on the Plaza, is worth stopping for.

Should you wish to schmooze with the oil barons, **Golf Playa Palmas**, Km 5.5 on the Carretera Carmen/Puerto Real, ☎ 838-4600, is a flat, nine-hole course, par 72, 6,234 yards, designed by Robert Von Hagge in 1988. There is a snack bar and drink bar on site.

**El Faro**, 3½ miles (six km) west of the bridge, is an active lighthouse that was built about 1850. It stands 92 feet (28 m) high, with the keeper's quarters on top. You may not enter the quarters. The lighthouse was built to guide ships coming into Lake Terminos. The other lighthouse on the lake is at the west end of the island. Built in 1905, this white concrete building stands about 70 feet (20 m) high. It too is still in use.

## Where to Stay

**Hotel Acuario**, #60 Calle 51, ☎ 382-3925, $$, in the center, has 40 clean, modern rooms in a con-

| HOTEL PRICE CHART | |
|---|---|
| Cost per night for two before tax | |
| $ | Under $50 |
| $$ | $51-$100 |
| $$$ | $101-$175 |
| $$$$ | $176-$250 |
| $$$$$ | Over $250 |

venient location. There is a small pool and Jacuzzi, and a restaurant with good food.

**Hotel del Parque**, #3 Calle 33, ☎ 382-5758, $$, on the Zocalo, has 25 affordable rooms with huge balconies. The hotel is clean and the management is friendly. It is a good deal.

**Holiday Inn**, #274 Calle 31, $$$, has close to 150 rooms. You know approximately what you'll get if you frequent this chain of hotels. There is safe parking and wheelchair access. It's directly across from the Premex headquarters.

**Hacienda Real del Carmen**, #106 Calle 31, ☎ 381-1500, $$$, is fairly new and is in the business section of town. The rooms have central air conditioning, large bathrooms and Internet service. There is a good buffet at lunch, a gym, a large and small pool, and a quiet piano bar (a treat in Mexico).

*Hacienda Real del Carmen lobby*

## Places to Eat

**El Jaguar**, Calle 5 north and Playacar, open daily from 10 am to 8 pm. This popular spot is good for dinner. Chicken in peanut sauce comes recommended ($11) but the burritos are great too. The restaurant is located on the boulevard, running up the center of the main street with traffic flowing on both sides.

**Oysters** are hand-picked by a couple of dozen fishermen from beds located about one hour from town. The fishermen fill at least five boxes a day and each box contains about 600 oysters. They are shucked in town at the co-operative. Thus, when you order oysters in the restaurants, you can be certain they are fresh. The average cost for a cocktail with 15 oysters is less than $4.

**La Samba Grill**, #38 Calle 55 between 56 and 52, ☎ 382-7774, is a great eatery specializing in Brazilian cuisine which translates into large quantities and varieties of both meat and veggie dishes. It's like a smorgasbord buffet, except the food choices come to your table. If you want it, it's yours. Otherwise, you wait until something arrives that you'd like. For a huge feast with drinks, you are looking at about $30. You will find a lot of oil barons patronizing Samba.

**Le Red**, Calle 20, ☎ 382-0544, beside the ferry slip. This open-air restaurant is good mostly for items such as afternoon ceviche and beer. A dish will cost about $4.

# East of Chompoton

The road leads to Calakmul, which is definitely an under-visited site. To go from Campeche to Xpujil along this route takes four hours by bus and the bus goes once a day.

**Escarcéga** is 58 miles (86 km) south of Champotón along Highway 181. The town isn't much more than a bustling truck stop. However, the two-story **Gran Hotel**, Ave Justo Sierra Mendez between Calle 43 and 30, ☎ 824-1908, $, is a decent place to crash. It has hot water, air conditioning and safe parking, if you happen to be too late to go to Xpujil, Chompoton or Campeche. There is a small restaurant across the street. The **Hotel Maria Isabella** is on the main street and not far away is the bright orange and purple **Hotel Escargea**. I never made it to these last two hotels.

# Xpujil

If visiting Calakmul, you will find that Xpujil, east of Escarcéga along Highway 181 is the closest town where you can stay. There are a number of hotels, some good and some that have already had too many tourists, which makes the staff snarky or unreasonable. The restaurants have similar qualities.

## Orientation

The main street of the village is on the highway halfway between Chetumal and Escarcéga. The street is lined with shops for local Mexicans and a few hotels catering to tourists visiting Calakmul. The road itself is used mostly by transport trucks.

## Getting Here & Away

**Cars** have to fill up at every gas station they pass as the stations are very few and far between. There is one about six miles (10 km) east of the town. Fill your tank here before going to Calakmul.

**Buses** go to Escarcéga every hour and ADO buses leave for Chetumal six times a day. There are second-class buses traveling to remote areas but no bus goes into the ruins of Calakmul.

## The Ruins

While in town, visit the **Xpujil Ruins**, visible from the road and within walking distance of the hotels. The name means "Place of Cattails," and it was discovered by the Carnegie Expedition in 1938. It is believed that

*Xpujil Ruins*

Xpujil, 1,000-1,500 years ago, was a bedroom community of the city of Becán. The central pyramid has an interesting face carved into it and a stairway that leads to the south tower will take you to a spectacular west-facing viewpoint. The stairs are huge stones that must be walked very carefully as some are narrow and some steps are missing. The buildings are in Rio Bec architectural style and once were covered in stucco and paint. There is a recently-created illustration that shows what the main temples looked like during their peak. The huge towers above the temples were even more attractive than they are now.

The second ruins close to Xpujil are at **Chincanna**, across the way from the Chincanna Eco Village. The name means the "Mouth of the Serpent's House" after the main façade at Structure II. Discovered by Jack Eaton in 1966, the ruins are in better shape than those at Becán. Although a minor ruin, the site is believed to have been a suburb of Becán. Many of the artifacts found here came from as far away as Honduras and Guatemala highlands. The one doorway is exquisitely carved and features the god Itzamna, the creator who resides in the sky.

*Becán (PhilippN)*

The third ruin to visit while in the area is **Becán** (see page 100), just four miles (six km) from the center of Xpujil. There is a road off the main highway, east of town, that directs you to this ruin. If you want to stay in the area, you can walk to and from Becán plus visit the ruins within a day.

# Places to Stay & Eat

The big problem with all the hotels in the area is jungle insects hat can, I'm sure, gnaw through a cement wall while you sleep. Ants are common, as are mosquitos. Carrying nsect repellent is a good idea, especially f you are a bit squeamish when it comes o insects.

| HOTEL PRICE CHART | |
|---|---|
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**Hotel Calakmul**, ☎ 832-3304, $$/$$$, has wo kinds of rooms: hovels and cells. The hovels have fans and screens on the windows but no baths. The cells are $50 a night and you must pay before you take the room. Even if you need to go to the ATM to get money, they won't trust you and you can't leave your baggage there while you get money. They treated me as if I had just come out of Alcatraz, and I had a child with me! Their restaurant was noisy and, as you can probably guess, I never ate there. Some think the food is good.

**Maya Mirador**, ☎ 871-6005, $/$$, has eight rustic wooden cabins, each with two beds. The windows are screened and have louvered shutters and there are fans. The private bathrooms are very modern. The rooms in the hotel building are small, with air conditioning, and are more expensive than the cabins. The restaurant, under a large palapa, has difficulty carrying all the dishes offered on the menu. The yard hasn't been well maintained and jungle noises will lull you to sleep.

*Chincanna EcoVillage*

**Chincanna EcoVillage**, Carretera Escarcéga, ☎ 816-2233, $$$/$$$$, is just outside Xpujil and west of the village ruins. The hotel, surrounded by lush jungle, has 30 rustic rooms in palapa-roofed bungalows. Each room has a ceiling fan, tiled bathroom and screened windows. The bungalows are above the pool and restaurant. There is a solarium near the pool where you can suck up the sun and then cool off in the pool. Excellent. Meal plans are available. If you choose an American breakfast and a dinner, the cost is about $30 per person. However, because of its simplicity (like most jungle cabins in the area), do not book for a long period of time until you have decided you want to stay.